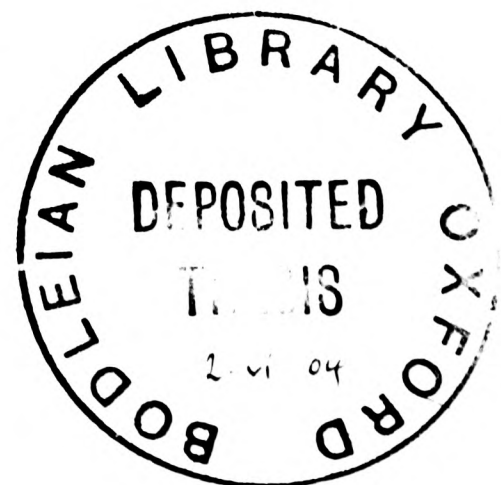


**Secularism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*  
and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: History, Nation,  
Language**

**Neelam Francesca Rashmi Srivastava  
Linacre College  
University of Oxford**

**Thesis submitted for the requirements of the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Trinity Term 2003 [ie 2004]**



## ABSTRACT

### Secularism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: History, Nation, Language

Neelam Srivastava  
Linacre College

D.Phil.  
Trinity Term 2003

This thesis is a comparative study of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993). It compares the novels' representations of the postcolonial Indian nation-state and of the conflict between secular and religious perspectives in the Indian public sphere. The novels are interpreted as responses to specific moments of crisis in the so-called "secular consensus" of the Indian state: *Midnight's Children* to the Emergency of 1975, *A Suitable Boy* to the rise of the Hindu right in the early 1990s. The aim of this study is to establish secularism as an interpretative concept in South Asian literature in English. Each chapter examines different aspects of the texts in relation to secularism. The first chapter outlines two different theoretical positions, Seth's "rationalist" and Rushdie's "radical" secularism. The second examines the question of minority identity in the two novels. The third explores the different narrative structures that shape their ideas of Indian citizenship. The fourth compares their differing versions of India's national past. The fifth interrogates the status of English as a secular language in the Indian context by examining the interaction between English and Indian vernaculars in the two texts. The dialogic form of the novel has been appropriated by postcolonial Indian writers in English in order to stage contrasting religious and secular worldviews. This dialogism, it is suggested, may offer the possibility of opening up the public sphere to different modes of communication not exclusively defined by rationalism.

## Acknowledgements

My supervisor, Dr Jon Mee, has been an immensely important mentor, providing me with the framework for thinking about Indian writing in English. He has generously given me productive and stimulating discussions, excellent suggestions, insightful and careful readings of my work, and a sense of structure to the project. I feel enormous gratitude to Dr Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. She has helped me and encouraged me in more ways than I can say: by reading my work and offering precious advice, by involving me in conferences and other academic opportunities in which to expand my knowledge of secularism and Indian literature, and most importantly, by her affectionate support. I have been very fortunate to have had her and Professor Robert Young as invaluable guides in my “postcolonial” education at Oxford. Joy Wang has been a truly loving and generous-hearted friend and an amazing intellectual companion. I am very grateful to the students of the “poco” group—Stuti Khanna, Baidik Bhattacharya, Manmay Zafar, Bashir Abu-Manneh—for great discussions and great times together.

I would like to thank the librarians at the Indian Institute Library of Oxford, for being so supportive of my work and for generously helping me out with any possible query I could have. I am very grateful to Professor Martin McLaughlin, who has helped me in so many ways, and to the Sub-Faculty of Italian, where I worked as Lector during the D.Phil. years. This job provided me with financial support, a beautiful office and taught me how to reconcile teaching with research. I would like to thank Linacre College for their financial support through the Mary Blaschko Scholarship. I would like to thank the European Science Foundation for a travel grant. My heartfelt thanks to the Political Science department of the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg, for their friendship and our stimulating debates on South Asia: Professor Subrata Mitra, Clemens Spiess, Stella Siebert, and Ursula Schmitt-Kohl.

It is impossible to thank properly my friend Eleanor Spaventa, because she has been so integral to my personal and academic life that it is hard to extricate all the multiple strands that join us together. Together we weathered

our D.Phils and emotional crises; I do not think many people have ever had such an absolutely generous friend.

Mike Enskat gave me immense love and support in the most difficult times and in the happiest times, and showed me the importance of a dynamic and positive outlook both in life and in academics. Luisa Calè has been a loving friend and an important intellectual and academic mentor. My heartfelt thanks to Sachi Srivastava, Livia Capponi, and Giulia Manca for their true friendship and support, and to Florian Finck, who was always there for me.

This thesis would not have been possible without my parents, Giulia Pancheri and Yogi Srivastava. They are models for me of personal and academic integrity, generosity and hard work. Their financial support and their belief in what I was doing have been essential. The thesis is dedicated to them and my brother Amrit. I would also like to thank my grandmother Illidia Pancheri for all her love and affection.

Finally, I would like to thank Vikram Seth, whose book has done so much to change my life since I first read it.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
0.1 The novel as a dialogic genre	8
0.2 The (recent) rise of the Indian novel in English	11
0.3 Responding to India's "present needs"	18
0.4 Nehruvianism and the developmental state	21
0.5 <i>Midnight's Children</i> and the Emergency	24
0.6 <i>A Suitable Boy</i> and the rise of the Hindu right	27
0.7 Nation versus state	30
0.8 National borders and narrative form	33
0.9 The thesis structure	37
<b>1. Chapter One. Theories of Secularism</b>	<b>41</b>
1.1 What is Indian secularism?	47
1.2.1 Secularization and National Identity in India and Britain	54
1.2.2 Early Indian Nationalism	56
1.2.3 The development of secular nationalism	60
1.3 Nehru's Rationalist Secularism	65
1.4.1 Critiques of rationalist secularism: Mitra and Nandy	68
1.4.2 Critiques of rationalist secularism: the radical secularism of Said, Mufti, and Viswanathan	71
1.5 Translation and Conversion	80
1.6 Dialogism and the Novel Form	85
<b>2. Chapter Two. Secularism and Minority</b>	<b>92</b>
2.1 Versions of secularism in Seth and Rushdie	93
2.2 Imagining a Polity	97
2.3 Muslim identity in <i>Midnight's Children</i> and <i>A Suitable Boy</i>	101
2.4 Muslim culture in <i>A Suitable Boy</i> and <i>The Discovery of India</i>	109
2.5 Muslim nationalism in <i>Midnight's Children</i>	112
2.6 Mythologies of secularism	115
2.7 Rushdie's aesthetics of eclecticism	123
2.8 "Light versus dark"	124
2.9 A wariness of any fixed belief	130
2.10 Creating the chamchawalas	132
2.11 Secularism and the private sphere	138
2.12 Syncretism and nationalism	146
2.13 Conclusion	153

### **3. Chapter Three. Types of Allegoresis in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy***

**155**

3.1	Jameson's national allegory	156
3.2	Producing meaning	161
3.3	Allegory and symbol	163
3.4	The function of description	173
3.5	Crowds and mobs	177
3.6	The construction of character	185
3.7	Time and the nation	192

### **4. Chapter Four. The Historical Event in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy***

**209**

4.1	Parallel developments: history and fiction	209
4.2	Genealogy and metaphysics	213
4.3	What is an event?	216
4.4	The chutnification of history	221
4.5.1	Historical intertexts in <i>Midnight's Children: A New History of India</i>	226
4.5.2	Historical intertexts in <i>Midnight's Children: The Discovery of India</i>	231
4.6.1	Historical events in <i>A Suitable Boy</i> : representing a riot	242
4.6.2	Historical events in <i>A Suitable Boy</i> : the Zamindari Abolition Act	254
4.7	Certainty and uncertainty	261

### **5. Chapter Five. Languages of the Nation in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy***

**263**

5.1	Politics and Narrative Form	263
5.2	<i>A Suitable Boy</i> and <i>Midnight's Children</i> : monologic versus polyphonic	266
5.3	Vernacularizing English	271
5.4	English as a semiotic system of modernity	274
5.5.1	The narrator as translator	276
5.5.2	Expressionistic and symbolic translations	279
5.5.3	Symbolic translation in <i>A Suitable Boy</i>	283
5.5.4	<i>Midnight's Children's</i> expressionistic translations	288
5.6	National languages in <i>A Suitable Boy</i>	293
5.7	Character zones and free indirect discourse in <i>A Suitable Boy</i>	299
5.8	Character zones and dialogue in <i>Midnight's Children</i>	300
5.9	The politics of language mixture	312

### **Conclusions**

**314**

### **Bibliography**

**322**

**Abbreviations used**

Salman Rushdie, <i>Midnight's Children</i>	MC
Vikram Seth, <i>A Suitable Boy</i>	ASB

## Introduction

“Do you believe in the virtue of compression?” asked a determined academic lady.

“Well, yes,” said Amit warily. The lady was rather fat.

“Why, then, is it rumored that your forthcoming novel [...] is to be so long? More than a thousand pages!” she exclaimed reproachfully, as if he were personally responsible for the nervous exhaustion of some future dissertationist. (ASB 1370)

My thesis is a comparative study of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* (1993).<sup>1</sup> My study analyzes how the two novels narrate different aspects of South Asian postcolonial identity within the secular framework of the novel in English. These different aspects include the question of secularism in the South Asian context; the issue of minority identity vis-à-vis the state; the different narratological models used to structure a narrative of India; the relationship to historical writing; and finally, the interaction between English and the vernacular (*bhasha*) languages.

### 0.1. The novel as a dialogic genre

At the basis of my reading of the two texts is the emphasis on the novel as a dialogic genre. The novel, because of its dialogic structure, emerges as the most versatile form for a staging of the conflict between secular and religious identity, because it allows for a heteroglot representation of conflicting worldviews and differing conceptualizations of the “national” past. In its ability to accommodate

---

<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (1981; repr. London: Picador, 1982); Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (1993; repr. New York: Harper Collins, 1994). All references henceforth will be to these editions.



different structures of thought it differs crucially from the writing of the social sciences (including historical writing), which is premised on the idea of science as a “higher language” into which the other languages are translated:

The idea of a godless, continuous, empty, and homogeneous time, which history shares with the other social sciences and modern political philosophy as a basic building block, belongs to this model of a higher, overarching language. It represents a structure of generality, an aspiration towards the scientific, that is built into conversations that take the modern historical consciousness for granted.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, the dialogism of the novel form permits the staging of different perspectives without the necessity of a final resolution within an overarching rationalist framework. Mythical versions of the past or religious sentiment may coexist in a non-hierarchical relationship with the secular language of rationalism.

Here I begin by discussing the reception of contemporary Indian fiction in English, in order to contest its reading as a cosmopolitan genre with little connection to issues of national relevance. Secondly, I show that in reality the two novels I have chosen are specific responses to the political situation at the time of their publication. The novels mark out an important period in the history of the Indian polity, that of the breakdown of the Nehruvian secular consensus. This breakdown began with the National Emergency (1975-77) and was further threatened by the rise to prominence of an alternative national ideology, Hindutva, based on the supremacy of Hindu religion and culture.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 75-76.

<sup>3</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot locates the erosion of the secularist norm in the 1980s, the time in which the Congress central government withdrew from the twin commitments of socio-economic development (upheld by Nehru’s socialist path and Indira Gandhi’s populism) and of

Secularism is a fundamental component of Indian postcolonial identity as it became a state policy adopted by Nehru after Independence, in the aftermath of Partition. In this historical context, both *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* draw on the Nehruvian model of secularism and pluralist democracy to contest the erosion of the secular public sphere, though in different ways. The novels contain frequent allusions to Nehru's writing, most notably his book *The Discovery of India*.<sup>4</sup> *A Suitable Boy* presents a wholesale recuperation of Nehruvian secularism, premised on a rationalist approach, which predicates the importance of relegating religion to the private sphere. Seth's "rationalist secularism" is sustained by the novel's realist mode, third-person omniscient narrator, and a flexible, though uniform, English style. *Midnight's Children* exploits the dialogic possibilities of the novel form in order to question the compartmentalization of religion and politics. Rushdie's expressionistic style and his digressive and non-linear narrative juxtapose religious, mythic, and secular worldviews as equal claimants to what constitutes the nation. I juxtapose rationalist and radical secularism as the two opposite discursive premises of Seth and Rushdie.

Seth's and Rushdie's engagement with the secularism issue is at one with their concern with history as a "secular genre", and the novels each revisit, in

---

secularism, the two pillars of what Jaffrelot calls the "legitimate norms of Indian politics". In the 1980s, Congress began pushing for a policy of economic liberalization and manipulated communal issues for political purposes. See Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilisation (With Special Reference to Central India)* (London: Hurst and Company, 1996), 336. Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya identifies the Emergency as the watershed between a Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian ideological orientation in Indian politics: "[...] since 1975, this model [of Nehruvian majoritarianism] has arguably been displaced, both in state policy and in national politics [...]. Emergency rule undermined the existing structures of popular democracy from which secularism derived its nominal legitimacy." Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya, "The Politics of Indian Secularism", *Modern Asian Studies* 26: 4 (October 1992), 828-829.

<sup>4</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (1946; repr. London: Meridian Books, 1956).

their own way, the historical novel. They both present an *allegoresis* of the Indian nation by recuperating different versions of the national past: in the sense that they present different configurations, or emplotments, of specific historical events in India's colonial and postcolonial history. Seth's novel tells the story of the early 1950s in India, in the style of a mimetic historical narrative where the plot appears to be found rather than invented. His mimetic narrative can be seen as a *symbolic* representation of the nation, in the sense that the unity between content and form, or meaning and representation, is unquestioned. *Midnight's Children* makes a self-conscious use of allegory to connect the life story of the narrator Saleem Sinai to that of the Indian nation. The "objectivity" of mimetic historical writing is put into question by Saleem's new way of writing Indian history. The profound dialogism of *Midnight's Children* is exemplified linguistically by the constant use of code-mixing and hybridization between English and Urdu in the text, which displays a deliberately jarring, expressionistic effect.<sup>5</sup> When compared to *Midnight's Children*, *A Suitable Boy* has a more markedly monologic voice, which tends to translate into English dialogues and words "originally" in Hindi, rather than leave them untranslated in the text the way Rushdie does.

## 0.2. The (recent) rise of the Indian novel in English

*Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, and *A Suitable Boy*, published in 1993, mark an important period in Indian fiction in English, that of the international explosion of this fiction in the transnational literary market. The rise to

---

<sup>5</sup> Rushdie's use of language is expressionistic in the sense that he does not aim for a "realistic" representation, but rather strives to recreate an English that conveys the emotional and cultural impact of the "source language".

international prominence of Indian English fiction was publicized by two Booker Prizes: the one awarded to Rushdie in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*, and the one awarded to Arundhati Roy in 1997 for *The God of Small Things*. This sixteen-year arc of literary production has been celebrated by Western reception as the work of the "Rushdie generation", and has effectively condensed into a new world canon, that of the Indian novel in English. It seemed as if Rushdie had opened up a way for other writers for narrating India in English.<sup>6</sup> A consistent presence in many of these novels was a renewed focus on national history and a self-aware transformation of English into an "Indian" literary idiom: *Midnight's Children* (1981), Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *A Suitable Boy* (1993), Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1994), Rukun Advani's *Beethoven Among the Cows* (1994), Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). A common theme in these novels is the construction of the narrator as historian, the novel as a stage for the representation of multiple or conflicting versions of historical events.

Jon Mee observes that "Indian writing in English is often presented as the favoured child of the globalization of literature."<sup>7</sup> The foreign-retained cosmopolitanism of the fiction is represented by the framing trope of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Anita Desai says of *Midnight's Children* that "'for the first time an Indian writer had found the language to say things which we had all been through but still had not found the words for. After that, I think every young Indian writer tried to write like Salman. The whole next generation of Indian writers started off by writing their own *Midnight's Children*. The effect his writing had on Indian writers was somehow to loosen their tongues.'" Mukul Kesavan, the author of *Looking Through Glass*, describes Rushdie's reading of *Midnight's Children* in Cambridge as a "religious experience". Ian Hamilton, "The First Life of Salman Rushdie", *New Yorker* (Dec. 25, 1995- Jan. 1, 1996), 104.

Western-educated writer at the same time inside and outside India, gifted with a “stereoscopic vision” which Rushdie claims is what Indian writers in Britain can offer in place of “whole sight”.<sup>8</sup> The high international visibility of a few select Indian novels in English, that are made to stand in for Indian literature as a whole, has prompted a wave of critical “suspicion” of these novels’ engagement with specifically Indian concerns.<sup>9</sup> They are seen as deracinated, overly hyped texts that have enabled modern Indian literature to finally become part of “world” literature, to the detriment of vernacular literatures that have been almost completely excluded from determinations of literary value in the West.

It is undeniably true that this recent explosion of Indian fiction in the West has hindered popular recognition of Indian literature in translation outside of India. Salman Rushdie himself has contributed to the dangerous synecdoche of Indian English fiction standing in for Indian literature in general. In his now

---

<sup>7</sup> Jon Mee, “Not At Home in English? India’s Foreign-Returned Fictions”, *The Round Table* 362 (2001), 712.

<sup>8</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), 19.

<sup>9</sup> Both of the novels under discussion have been accused of writing for the West primarily because they seem to be addressed to a Western audience and as a corollary, because they are written in English. Harish Trivedi contends that in *Midnight’s Children*, “the whole orientation of [Rushdie’s] narrative seems to suggest that it is addressed not to an Indian insider but to a Western outsider. The shocking novelty and the precious rarity of the novel which arose from the ‘Indianness’ of the text as well as the author, and which helped make it such a huge sensation in the West, can hardly be experienced as such in India, whether by someone reading him in English or in translation.” Trivedi, “Salman the Funtoosh: Magic Bilingualism in *Midnight’s Children*”, *Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children: A Book of Readings*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999), 81. Francesca Orsini agrees with Pascale Casanova’s definition of *A Suitable Boy* as an example of neo-colonial novel “with all the tried and tested recipes of exoticism”. Orsini explains the realism of *A Suitable Boy* as a method for “painstakingly explaining to the foreigners what Indian trains and mud-thatched huts look like.” Orsini, developing a suggestion by Amit Chaudhuri, concludes that “in the florid, sensuous, inclusive, multicultural world of the post-Rushdie, postcolonial novel, the West can settle down to contemplate, not India, but its latest reinterpretation of itself.” Francesca Orsini, “India in the Mirror of World Fiction”, *New Left Review* 13 (Jan.-Feb. 2002), 88. Though both Orsini and Trivedi highlight narrative practices by Indian English authors that would seem to make their fiction more appealing to Western readers, it should be said that Orsini and Trivedi move from different intentions in their critique. Trivedi’s position vis-à-vis Rushdie is informed by a certain implied nativism, a critique of Rushdie’s insufficient “authenticity”—whereas Orsini seeks to understand why Indian English fiction has entered the canon of world literature, and Hindi literature, for example, has not.

notorious introduction to his anthology of Indian (English) writing, he relates the “perhaps rather surprising point” about his survey of Indian literature:

This is it: the prose-writing—both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period by Indian writers *working in English*, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 “official languages” of India, the so-called “vernacular languages”, during the same time; and indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, “Indo-Anglian” literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.<sup>10</sup>

The comment in itself needs no explicit critique here for it to appear ludicrous in its sweeping generalizations, though it stands as a reminder to the considerable power wielded by a few select postcolonial writers in deciding what goes to form the postcolonial canon. By asserting so strongly the hegemony of Indian English fiction, it automatically invites suspicion of its claims. The superior literary value assigned to English over vernacular literatures is based on the unproblematic assumption that the Indian books that do reach Western audiences are automatically “more important” than the ones that don’t. It is strangely naïve on the part of Rushdie not to consider that marketing and distribution processes ensure that Indian books in English have much more chance of circulating on the international book market than books written in the

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, ed. Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (London: Vintage, 1997), x. Rushdie’s anthology contains only one selection from an Indian author not originally written in English, which is why the anthology has been so heavily criticized by both Indian and Western critics (given that Rushdie freely confesses he only knows one Indian language apart from English). Amit Chaudhuri’s recent anthology, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, ed. Amit Chaudhuri (London: Picador, 2001) includes much literature in translation, and it has been seen as a response to Rushdie’s. His framing statements about the need to question the centrality of the postcolonial Indian novel in English are effectively a riposte to Rushdie’s astounding position vis-à-vis vernacular literature in India. It is truly striking that the most recent result of Rushdie’s decades-old project of writing back to the empire is his reconstruction of a canon of postcolonial literature to aggressively set against vernacular literary production.

vernaculars and then translated into English.<sup>11</sup> Rushdie's statement also opens up the question of the complex relationship between the assignation of literary value to Indian English writing and the elite status of its writers and readers. Aijaz Ahmad, commenting on the fact that English has become the link language for literary translations from other Indian languages, finds that English is the least suited for this role, not because it came to India with colonialism, but because it is, "among all the Indian languages, the most removed, in structure and ambience, from all the other Indian languages, hence least able to bridge the cultural gap between the original and the translated text."<sup>12</sup>

What has occurred in recent criticism is the contextualization of Indian English writing within a canon shaped in the Western academy, namely that of "postcolonial literature". Against Rushdie's facile equation between literary value and availability in the international book market, the Indian critics Harish Trivedi and Makarand Paranjape claim that the Indian novel in English is written with a Western audience in mind, and they highlight its deracination and alienation from its Indian subject-matter and context. Trivedi states that no Indian "postcolonial" writer, unlike their Kenyan or Nigerian counterparts, has been politically persecuted; rather they left India for the "cultural and material attractions of the West". The location in the West, Trivedi, says, citing (as usual) the case of Salman Rushdie, means that this writing is hardly resistant or oppositional; the writers who stay at home are truly writing *for India*, by virtue

---

<sup>11</sup> See Chaudhuri, "The Construction of the Indian Novel in English", *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*.

<sup>12</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, "'Indian Literature': Notes Towards the Definition of a Category", *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 250.

of their not having left it.<sup>13</sup> In an even more flagrantly nativist vein, Makarand Paranjape also attributes the “inauthenticity” of Indo-Anglian writers to issues of location by claiming that they

offer a certain kind of representation of India which is governed by the West’s tastes, images, specifications and likings [....] Behind such a compromise, infiltration and cooptation is the writer’s location—ideological, political, cultural and of course, geographical.<sup>14</sup>

What is striking about these formulations is that both critics have identified nativism with a seemingly oppositional stance, against what Paranjape calls “foreign domination”, an ambiguous term at best since it can easily be interpreted, for instance, to include Muslim cultural influences in India.<sup>15</sup> Conservative Hindu opinion, now politically represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party, depicts Islamic culture as a “foreign influence” over the “original” Indic civilization of the subcontinent, despite the fact that Hindu-Muslim cultural interactions have more than a thousand years’ history.<sup>16</sup> There is a slightly suspect return to the issue of “authenticity” and essentialist ideas of a “true” depiction of Indian reality that would seem to be realized only in *bhasha* or vernacular literatures, and almost inevitably coincide with Hindu imaginings of the nation.<sup>17</sup> Their claims disregard the fact that Hindi has become a

---

<sup>13</sup> Trivedi, “India and Postcolonial Discourse”, *Interrogating Postcolonialism: Theory, Text and Context*. ed. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996), 242-243.

<sup>14</sup> Makarand Paranjape, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Paranjape, “Preface”, *Nativism: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Makarand Paranjape (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997), xiv.

<sup>16</sup> The first Islamic incursions in the subcontinent occurred in the seventh and eighth centuries AD. See Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 23-24.

<sup>17</sup> Trivedi’s and Paranjape’s positions exhibit clear signs of a Hindu revivalist stance. Paranjape, in his study of the Indian English novel, claims that “Raja Rao is our best Indian English novelist



transnational language in its own right, as a spoken language (alongside others) in Indian diasporic communities.

On the other hand, Western reception tends to place Indian novels in English within a world-literature context, claiming a “universality” for their writing which, implicitly, Indian literature in translation does not seem to possess.<sup>18</sup> Universality, in this case, is equivalent to translatability for a non-Indian audience. In postcolonial academic criticism, certain Indian novels in English—*Midnight's Children* is often used as an exemplary case in point—are seen as texts that point to a problematization “of essentialist and parochial ideas of national identities, while undermining metropolitan assumptions of priority.”<sup>19</sup>

Select novels, among which *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*, have gone to form a certain canon which places together Indian, Caribbean, Nigerian, Australian, Canadian fiction as part of a (teachable) body of literature known as postcolonial writing. This move has momentous effects on the ways in which this literature is studied and received more generally, one of which is to de-contextualize these works.<sup>20</sup>

---

because, ultimately, he helps us recover and revitalize our cultural, intellectual and spiritual traditions”. Paranjape is also prescriptive, in a way reminiscent of fascist cultural directives, about the type of literature that should be produced in India today, saying that an Indian literary text “ought to assist in the incomplete and unfinished task of nation building” by constructing “the institutions and traditions required for a healthy and vibrant Indian culture”. Paranjape, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> See Orsini’s excellent analysis of this point in her article “India in the Mirror of World Fiction”, 75-88.

<sup>19</sup> Mee, “Not At Home in English?”, 712.

<sup>20</sup> Neil Lazarus affirms that postcolonial criticism has contributed to the formation of a very narrow canonical body of works; indeed he claims that in the postcolonial literary canon, there is in a strict sense only one author, Salman Rushdie. Not only is the canon very narrow, but the critical focus is as well, which usually limits itself to “the profuse critical discussions of nationalism as imagined community [...] and thus also the busy commentaries on history as a master narrative intrinsically complicit with domination.” Lazarus proposes different topics of critical focus, that he claims have been neglected in the critical literature, such as state violence and class relations, though it is not clear which critics he has in mind when making these claims.

### 0.3. Responding to India's "present needs"

While on the one hand, Trivedi and Paranjape consider Indian writing in English deracinated, on the other hand Western reception tends to perpetuate this conception by de-contextualizing it and including into the canon of "world literature". Against both of these prevailing critical tendencies, my thesis sets out to re-situate *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* in a South Asian context, demonstrating that in actuality they are specific responses to India's "present needs".<sup>21</sup> My choice of these novels was partly determined by their being texts that engage with pressing issues of public debate in India. After Independence, secularism, understood as non-sectarianism in the public sphere and the relegation of religion to the private sphere, became the foundation of state policy under Nehru. Each novel configures the relationship between religion and the state in such a way as to create two different representations of the Indian nation, yet each equally relevant for an understanding of Indian secularism.<sup>22</sup>

---

See Neil Lazarus, "The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism", *The European Legacy* 7:6 (Dec. 2002), 772.

<sup>21</sup> The expression "present needs" is used by Michel Foucault in discussing different notions of the historical sense, that of the "metaphysician" and that of the "genealogist": "In placing present needs at the origin, the metaphysician would convince us of an obscure purpose that seeks its realization at the moment it arises. Genealogy, however, seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning but the hazardous play of dominations." Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 148.

<sup>22</sup> Though I set out to prove that these two novels in particular engage at a profound level with the question of national identity, it is obvious that the Indian novel in English is by no means the most significant form of writing about the nation. Amit Chaudhuri very rightly points out that "there is an implication [...] that only in the English language do Indian writers have the vantage-point, or at least feel the obligation, to articulate that post-colonial totality called 'India' (on the other hand, it sometimes seems that the post-colonial totality called 'India' only exists in the works of Indian English novelists or in the commentaries they engender)". He argues for a

It becomes particularly productive to compare *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* because of their aspirations to represent a pan-Indian reality, and because of the very different, indeed opposite uses they make of the novel in English and the different narrative traditions they draw on. The fact that they have taken on the role of "narratives of the nation" is partly determined by the transnational scope of their readership. Peter van der Veer links the different audiences of television and literature in India to differences in the way the nation is imagined in these two mediums. The showing of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* on television has demonstrated that while this "traditional" text can be "nationalized" and made to be the form in which the nation is imagined for its viewers, what characterizes the modern novel in the late twentieth-century is that it is not written with reference to the nation as a bounded group of national "readers".<sup>23</sup> A fundamental corollary to his remark is that this transnational dimension almost exclusively characterizes the Indian novel *in English*, rather than the *bhasha* languages: it is only in English that the nation can be imagined for a wider audience that transcends national boundaries. Van der Veer makes the example of the Indian English writer R.K. Narayan, who writes in English

---

re-interpretation of the supposed "Indianness" of a text, saying that it does not necessarily lie in writing a national narrative, but also in writing "about cultures and localities that are both situated in, and disperse the idea of, the nation." Amit Chaudhuri, "The Construction of the Indian Novel in English", *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, xxiii-xxiv. The issue of representativeness opens up a larger question, that of the effective diffusion of this literature among a South Asian readership. Obviously, the first barrier is language, so that the Indian novel in English acquires the status of an elite genre, only available to those who know English. This readership is formed by a distinct social, economic and cultural class.

<sup>23</sup> However, visual culture also has a very strong transnational dimension, given the lucrative overseas market in *Ramayana* videos and DVDs and Hindu mythological films. The transnational dimension of Hindutva is most notably represented by the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or World Hindu Council), who for years has been promoting Hindu culture in the US, especially among expatriates. Through its donations, it provides an important source of funds for the VHP in India. According to Arvind Rajagopal, the NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) support a militant nationalist and Hinduist party like the BJP at home as a way to reinforce their cultural and emotional links with India, and simultaneously to assert a cultural difference from the

for a transnational audience and thus takes care that his references to Hindu tradition do not require too much prior knowledge:

It is precisely this literary objectification of culture for a transnational audience, however, that produces national culture. It is in the dialectic of the national and the transnational that the late twentieth-century novel situates itself.<sup>24</sup>

The novel becomes the literary form that creates the nation for a transnational audience, rather than an exclusively national one. More specifically, it appeals to an imagined community of readers represented by the Indian national and transnational English-speaking middle class. An idea of nation based on religion is produced by visual culture such as film and television, whose medium of communication are the *bhasha* languages, especially Hindi. Thus one can distinguish between a “national” Indian nation, and a “transnational” Indian nation, each distinct for the social, economic, urban/rural locations of its consumers; though of course the two audiences often overlap, especially given the strong middle-class support of Hindutva. The novel in English becomes the privileged form of writing for the latter.<sup>25</sup>

*Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* are secular narratives of the nation-state, albeit underscored by two profoundly different ideas of what it means to be secular in India today. These two novels engage intimately with national issues by responding to India's “present needs” in different ways. They are both historical novels, in the sense that they both present versions of a national

---

majority in their host country. See Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 239-240.

<sup>24</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 182.

narrative built upon an interpretation of the Indian *nation's* past (as opposed to India as a purely geographical and mythical location; the mythical and geographic elements are clearly present in both novels, but are subsumed into the novels' representation of the nation). They do this, I contend, in order to write back to India's political situation at the time in which the two novels were written. Historical novels, as a genre, tend to place "present needs at the origin", in the sense that the version of the national past they recuperate or invent is construed as a political and ideological response to the contemporary situation at the time of publication.

But as historical novels, *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* not only address different present needs, they are also implicitly premised on different notions of the historical sense. Both novels project a secular and multicultural vision of the Indian nation-state, which clearly reveals their debts to nationalism as articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India*. *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* can be said to be Nehruvian epics, and both present, in very different ways, a re-working and a recuperation of Nehru's idea of the Indian nation-state. The incorporation of India's multilingual diversity into the language of the novels helps to project the ideals of secularism and of pluralist democracy at the basis of Seth and Rushdie's political visions.

#### 0.4. Nehruvianism and the developmental state

---

<sup>25</sup> By "transnational" Indian nation I mean the audience of readers belonging to the Indian diaspora, which forms an important part of the readership of Indian literature in English.

Nehruvianism defines the consensus that undergirded the Indian developmental state, referring to a particular distribution of political power and its legitimating vision of secular, autarkic growth.<sup>26</sup> In Indian political usage, it acquired its present meaning as a guiding concept for state policy under Nehru and the left-leaning components of the Indian Congress Party in the years just after Independence. Nehruvianism envisaged not an irreligious or anti-religious state, but rather a non-sectarian state, which did not privilege one religion over another.

Under Nehru, a secular approach was combined with a developmentalist idea of the nation-state. The state's post-Independence focus on economic development emphasized the prevailing belief that social change would follow in its wake. Indeed during the first decades after Independence, according to Arvind Rajagopal, "the work of the economy was seen to stand for and be capable of resolving any problems that arose in the sphere of culture; technocracy was in fact the form of politics."<sup>27</sup> The language in which nation-building proceeded along secular and developmental lines was English.<sup>28</sup> The post-Independence political and administrative conceptualizations of the nation-state at a pan-Indian level came to be constructed exclusively in the English language. This in part due to the fact that the class that came to identify most closely with Nehru's secular and developmentalist ideology was the

---

<sup>26</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj remarks that the pragmatic adoption of English as the language of nation-building had much to do with the developmental and scientific emphasis of Nehruvian state policy; such emphasis inevitably privileged English as the language of communication among the high bureaucracy, without the impediments of translation between vernacular languages. See Sudipta Kaviraj, "Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India", *Nationalstaat und Sprachkonflikte in Süd- und Südostasien*, ed. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), 55.

English-speaking upper-middle class elite that had stood most to gain from state-planned economic development: the sizable chunk of the Indian middle-class who worked in the public sector, bureaucrats, civil servants, scientists, industrialists who received license permits from the Indian government.<sup>29</sup> English became the language in which the secular identity of the state was constructed; its founding texts in a sense were the Indian Constitution and Nehru's *The Discovery of India*.<sup>30</sup> Land reform was one of the main planks of Congress's electoral campaigns in the early years after Independence: the vow to put an end to "feudal" land-holdings and re-distribute land among the poorer tenants was one of the strategies that assured mass popularity. Nehru, basing his idea of Indian history on a European-based model of historical "progress", saw "the end of feudalism" as a symbolic and material act that

---

<sup>29</sup> "Nehruvianism, held to represent the consent of the majority, in fact involved only a small minority, comprised of the educated upper and middle classes." See Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> The inherently elitist quality of the secularist project has been the focus of much recent critical debate on secularism, most notably in the work of Ashis Nandy. See Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration", *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 321-344. According to Nandy, secularism's elitist nature made it fail to gain a more widespread political currency among the masses; it was seen as a Western-imported ideology that made little impact on the people's perceptions and ideological orientations towards the public sphere. Nandy's argument that the Indian elite did not succeed in making secularism a "popular" national ideology appears convincing if one draws an analogy with the situation in Italy at the turn of last century. According to Antonio Gramsci, the Italian intellectuals' failure to communicate an idea of secular culture to the population at large allowed the Catholic Church a continued ideological influence over popular mentality: "[t]he lay forces [...] have been incapable of satisfying the intellectual needs of the people precisely because they have failed to represent a lay culture, because they have not known how to educate a modern 'humanism' able to reach right to the simplest and most uneducated classes, as was necessary from the national point of view, and because they have been tied to an antiquated world, narrow, abstract, too individualistic or caste-like." Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), 211. In some sense, the enormous popularity of the televised *Ramayana* over the extremely limited circulation of the Indian novel in English testifies to the different levels of circulation, among the Indian audience, of a popular cultural product informed by a religious intent and that of a secular and linguistically "elitist" genre such as English-language fiction.

would bring the nation from the Middle Ages into modernity.<sup>31</sup> The Zamindari Abolition Act, which took place state by state rather than on a federal level, is a central event in *A Suitable Boy*, whose national narrative adopts a teleological and developmental view of historical progress very similar to Nehru's own.

### 0.5. *Midnight's Children* and the Emergency

*Midnight's Children* self-consciously foregrounds itself as a national allegory in the sense that Saleem Sinai, the narrator, continually claims an ironic, parodic, and always already disjunctive identification with India. His is an encyclopedic narrative—"I have been a swallower of lives", Saleem says at the beginning of his story, "and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well."<sup>32</sup> Saleem's accumulative method, characterized by continuous digressions, expresses through Saleem's mind and body the multifarious identities of the nation. The novel contains a strong critique of the National Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975, and indeed it can be read as an anti-Emergency novel.<sup>33</sup> During her Prime Ministership, Indira Gandhi had

---

<sup>31</sup> Congress effected neither an equitable nor a complete re-distribution of land among the small and medium cultivators. In *A Suitable Boy* the tenant Kachheru, who is a *chamar* (untouchable) is evicted from his village as an unintended consequence of the land reform designed to restore the land to people like him who had been cultivating it for centuries. Those who effectively stood most to gain from the land reforms were the medium land-holders. As it had done before Independence, Congress continued to rely on the upper-caste rural landlords and richer farmers to deliver the votes of those lower in the social order. Congress emerged as a unique political party in South Asia: "a mass party with strong roots in the countryside yet given to political conservatism." The strong rural basis of the Congress—both in terms of the wealth of some of its major landowning supporters and in terms of sheer voting numbers—made it difficult for the Congress to effect a just re-distribution of land or promote large-scale industrialization of the country. See Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin, 1997), 75.

<sup>32</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981; repr. London: Picador, 1982), 9.

<sup>33</sup> In 1975, Indira Gandhi, availing herself of a constitutional clause, proclaimed a state of National Emergency, in which all civil liberties were suspended, censorship was imposed on the press, thousands of oppositional elements were jailed and all executive powers were concentrated in her hands: effectively, the Emergency was a dictatorship that lasted almost two



sought to promote a populist economic agenda. But radical economic policy did not reconcile easily with the bypassing of the democratic process, and by the mid-70s an ever-widening split had occurred between state authority and the people, including representatives in opposition parties, labor unions, and other organizations.<sup>34</sup> *Midnight's Children* allegorizes these oppositional forces in the magician's ghetto, the place where the narrator Saleem finds a home after losing his family and fighting in the Pakistani Army.

*Midnight's Children's* structural digressions and linguistic excess can be read as a metaphor of the democratic forces rising up against the authoritarianism of the Emergency. The history of the Indian nation cannot be contained within the official narrative of the state, as Indira Gandhi tried to reinforce it during her reign, especially during the Emergency years (indeed the slogan of her electoral campaign was India is Indira, Indira is India). The multiple possibilities that had been unleashed by Independence, represented in the novel by the multifarious group of the midnight children, were inexorably being channeled into a single monolithic Indian identity that left little space for other identities—especially Muslims. Indira Gandhi herself is characterized as the Widow, with all the most negative connotations that this figure has in Indian popular consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

---

years. The Emergency has been read as an attempt to find an authoritarian solution to the problem of inducing political consent. See Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj defines Indira Gandhi's political doctrine as a "particularly dangerous combination of a bourgeois leader invoking socialist principles to evade encumbrances of bourgeois constitutionalism." Sudipta Kaviraj, "Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly* 21:38-39 (Sept. 20-27, 1986), 1700.

<sup>35</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan emphasizes Rushdie's sexist use of allegory in constructing the Widow figure in *Midnight's Children*: "The popular negative connotations of Hindu widowhood, viewed in the popular imagination not merely as the misfortune of women but as their destruction of the male, are associated with a (widowed) Prime Minister whose defining act is the massive sterilization programme of the Emergency." Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Gender,

The novel is told from Saleem's present temporal location, 1977, looking back onto India's recent past, a history of the idea of India as a nation. The narrative begins in 1915, with the story of his grandfather's loss of faith. This loss of faith, or radical doubt of the existence of God, is closely followed by his conversion to the nationalist cause, and ends with Saleem who is about to experience disintegration into 600 million constitutive identities, the population of India. His narrative of India is reacting against an authoritarian state; hence his anti-statism, and his writing of a defiantly pluralist and centrifugal history of India, where the trajectory of Muslim identity figures prominently. *Midnight's Children* cannot endorse the idea of a single national identity, because it is narrated from a minoritarian perspective, that of the Muslim Saleem Sinai (though in the course of the novel he reveals his multiple parentage, Hindu and British as well).

The Emergency marked the turning-point in which the historical consensus represented in the Congress began effectively to unravel. Thus we can place *Midnight's Children* at the cusp of the crisis of the Nehruvian, socialist, secular state: it is an irony that the word "secular" was introduced in the Constitution to define the Indian republic in 1976, right in the middle of the Emergency, a time in which faith in Indian democracy and pluralism was being decisively eroded among the Indian public. *Midnight's Children* documents this gradual erosion and its entire take on the history of the Indian nation is shaped by the fact of its being an anti-Emergency narrative. Saleem's obsession with centrality is questioned as being similar to Indira Gandhi's; not a "healthy"

myth of the nation, which is arguably essential if a nation is to prosper, but a paranoid megalomania:

Unpalatable, awkward queries: did Saleem's dream of saving the nation leak, through the osmotic tissues of history, into the thoughts of the Prime Minister herself? Was my lifelong belief in the equation between the State and myself transmuted in the Madam's mind, into in-those-days-famous phrase: *India is Indira and Indira is India*? Were we competitors for centrality—was she gripped by a lust for meaning as profound as my own—and was that, was that why... ? (MC 420)

### 0.6. *A Suitable Boy* and the rise of the Hindu right

*A Suitable Boy*, published in 1993, was responding to a different political context from that of *Midnight's Children*. The novel, which has an omniscient third-person narrator, is set between 1950 and 1952, key years in the period that witnessed the rise of the Indian middle class and the consolidation of the Indian state along secular lines under India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In its representation of social, political, and economic changes in the first years after Independence, the novel endorses a progressivist and gradualist approach to the dynamics of social transformations.<sup>36</sup>

The novel is a narrative of origins of the Indian state. A characteristic of the historical novel is that its version of the national past implicitly projects an ideal present and future for the nation. The historical novel becomes a way to make the past accessible to the present, and to assert a metonymic contiguity of

---

<sup>36</sup> India's transition from a colonial to a postcolonial state was in the form of a "passive revolution". The transformative role of the new national state was limited to reformist and molecular changes, so that the coming of Independence acquired the dual character of revolution/restoration. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 49. In India, passive revolution after Independence meant that "the promise of averting any fundamental social transformation is the necessary compromise the state makes with the old ruling classes, so that the state becomes at

the past with the present; the assumption being that if we follow the narrative to its beginning, we can reach the “point of origin” of national history.<sup>37</sup> The novel’s plot revolves around four Indian families, each one a different incarnation of the Indian elite: three are Hindu, one is Muslim. The realism of Seth’s style is underscored by a developmental and statist idea of the nation-state, which endorses Nehruvian secularism at a time in which Nehru’s idea of the Indian secular state was subject to severe erosion in the political sphere, with the rise of the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party. Secularism was being displaced as a hegemonic political solution for conceiving and running the Indian state, especially in its relation to minorities. The rise of the Hindu right, and the spread of Hindutva ideology, was premised on a perceived need to break with the past. The Hindu nationalists did so paradoxically, by claiming to return to a deeper, purer past. To be Hindu, for them, “became a triumphant declaration of strength and vigor, and the symbol of an aggressive culture on the ascendant.”<sup>38</sup> They defined the state’s earlier secular policy, in particular its treatment of the Muslim minority as minority appeasement: Nehruvian secularism was accused of excluding Hindu culture and religion from public life, while making generous allowances to minorities, to the extent of providing for community-based civil codes for certain minorities.

The middle class and big business began to view Hindutva ideology as a new form for conceiving national identity; and, on a more pragmatic level, a new way for garnering mass consent by its political appropriation of Hindu

---

once the guardian of tradition and the apostle of modernity.” Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 44-45.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Pierce, “Preying on the Past: Contexts of Some Recent Neo-Historical Fiction”, *Australian Literary Studies* 15:4 (Oct. 1992), 305.

<sup>38</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 35.

religious symbols, which for many potential voters formed part of their lived experience of faith.<sup>39</sup> The India of *A Suitable Boy* has a strong relationship to the period in which the novel was published. The cultural and social mores of 1950s India are still easily recognizable in the India of the 1990s. But the political present of 1993 had witnessed a radical shift in the hegemonic ideology of the Indian public sphere: Nehruvian secularism was out, Hindutva ideology was in. Essential Indianness was equated with Hinduness. History was being re-written along communal lines and the Muslims were seen as invaders and destroyers of a pure Aryan culture that the more extreme proponents of Hindutva were intent on recuperating. The novel can be read as a way of addressing the perceived “present needs” of the Indian polity by proposing a return to Nehruvianism, by recreating a national narrative set in the heart of the Nehru era, the heyday of secular nationalism in the aftermath of Partition. Thus, contrary to Hindutva ideology, Seth proposes not a break with the nation’s secular past, but a return to it in order to address the present needs of the polity, which is being fragmented along communal lines. Multiculturalism, rather than a majoritarian ideology like Hindutva, is the only solution for a functioning polity. What Seth has in mind is a strongly statist multiculturalism à la Nehru. Nehru is depicted as

a man whose greatness of heart won the hearts of others, and whose meandering pleas for mutual tolerance kept a volatile country, not merely in those early and most dangerous years but throughout his own lifetime, safe at least from the systemic clutch of religious fanaticism. (ASB 1355)

---

<sup>39</sup> A turning point for the BJP was the Ram Temple movement, that culminated in 1991 with the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, that had been erected on a site supposedly built to

One of the central political events in the novel is a so-called “communal riot”, sparked by religious strife between Hindus and Muslims; this conflict is portrayed as a failure of citizenship, a failure to discard pre-existing religious identities *in the public sphere* of the city streets, in favor of a new national Indian secular identity.<sup>40</sup> *A Suitable Boy* could even be seen as a literary response to the screening of the *Ramayana* on state television, a broadcast which van der Veer and Rajagopal contend was a way for imagining the nation on religious, rather than secular terms.<sup>41</sup>

### 0.7. Nation versus state

These two novels are “historical” in the sense that they respond to specific moments of India’s historical and political context at the time of publication. Both engage with the question of secularism and conceive the novel form as non-sectarian, though it is secular in different ways in both Rushdie and Seth. Whereas visual culture, such as movies and television, is able to mobilize audiences into imagining the nation as a religious construct, the novels written by Rushdie and Seth conceived of the nation in secular terms. However, a

---

mark the birthplace of Ram. The local Congress leaders did nothing to stop the demolition, which showed to what extent Congress was implicated in the championing of Hindutva.

<sup>40</sup> In Chakrabarty’s words, “even today the Anglo-Indian word ‘communalism’ refers to those who repeatedly fail to measure up to the secular ideals of citizenship.” Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> The BJP, according to Rajagopal, capitalized on the serial’s enormous success: “Drawing on myth and devotionism to portray a golden age of tradition that was yet ahead of the modern era in statecraft and warfare, the show which ran from January 1987 to September 1990 adroitly made appeals to diverse social groups, under a symbolic rubric that could be tied to the banner of Hindu assertion.” Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 15. Film and media are privileged mediums for interacting with devotional expectation, according to van der Veer, and thus the screening of the *Ramayana* on state television permitted viewers to feel connected as part of a religious gathering (*satsang*), while allowing everyone to stay at home with their own family. Van der Veer relates this unity of religious feeling through television to the doing of the novel, namely the imagining of a nation of individuals; “and so it is not surprising that the success of [the *Ramayana*] has been related to the recent upsurge in religious nationalism.” Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 176.

secular approach assumes two different meanings in *Midnight's Children* and in *A Suitable Boy*.

*Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* are two novels that narrate a radical shift in the perception of the public sphere in India. New forms of political participation with the rise of the BJP and caste-based politics in the Indian states also signalled that the language of the political elite, and indeed of the public sphere, was no longer English, just as political conceptions of the nation were no longer dominated by secularism. The two novels have different approaches to the idea of the state, which indeed underwent an important evolution between the end of the Emergency and the beginning of the 90s. *A Suitable Boy* gives great space to democratic debates within the Legislative Assembly, which becomes the symbol of nation-building; here the different voices representing the electorate enter in dialogue with each other. But Seth shows that democracy can only function *within* institutions, such as the Legislative Assembly and the courtroom (where much of the Zamindari Abolition Act is debated). There is no legitimacy attached to violent insurgency such as riots; the perpetrators of riots are portrayed as a mob, not as citizens. The rioters are situated *outside* the nation-space; they are "not yet" citizens.<sup>42</sup> This could be read as a defense of democratic institutions that were envisaged by the Constitution as the only bodies that could guarantee fair and equal treatment of minorities within a secular space. In the context of political

---

<sup>42</sup> This "not yet" implicit in Seth's representation of participants in communal riots recalls Chakrabarty's critique of historicism as it informs ideas of "political modernity" in the post-colonial context: "Within this thought [historicism], it could always be said with reason that some people were less modern than others, and that the former needed a period of preparation and waiting before they could be recognized as full participants in political modernity. But this was precisely the argument of the colonizer—the 'not yet' to which the colonized nationalist opposed his or her 'now'." Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 9.

developments of the 80s and 90s, this defense appears as a response to progressive Hinduization of the nation-space, that wishes to deny a representative space to Muslim identity as a fundamental part of Indian identity. *A Suitable Boy*, in its deploration of communalism and endorsement of a statist secularism, displays the recent uneasiness on the part of left-leaning activists and intellectuals towards these new ideas of the nation based on religious separatism. The novel's "solution" in this sense is to return to Nehru.

An important characteristic of *A Suitable Boy* that distinguishes it from *Midnight's Children* is that it has a statist approach to nation-forming. Seth constructs an organic view of what India means to his middle-class characters, which is articulated *within* the boundaries of the nation-state. While Rushdie simultaneously embraces and radically questions the premises of secular nationalism from its inception in the early days of the Independence movement to its final ignominious act of the Emergency, Seth is already working within an accepted idea of the nation, which is that of Nehru's secular developmentalist state. Seth's is an Indian, as opposed to more a broadly South Asian, perspective. Rushdie, on the other hand, is writing a history of the nation from the perspective of the Emergency, which has seen the rejection of democracy on the part of the Indira Gandhi government and increasingly monolithic idea of what it means to be Indian. Hence he celebrates the "thousand voices of midnight", and the oppositional energies of the nation represented by the subaltern classes, such as the language marchers whom Saleem accidentally collides with as a child or the conjurers of the magicians' ghetto.<sup>43</sup> He celebrates

---

<sup>43</sup> Seth's and Rushdie's contrasting ideas of the nation are aptly illustrated by Homi Bhabha's distinction between performative and pedagogical aspects of nation-forming, and how the



all the multitudes that cannot be contained within the pedagogical and historicist confines of the nation-space. Rushdie's definition of India is a South Asian one, as it spans Kashmir (a contested territory between India and Pakistan), Pakistan and Bangladesh. This understanding of India as an entity that transcends national borders is in contrast with Seth's imagined community, firmly and unquestioningly set within the geographical confines of the post-Independence Indian nation-state.

### 0.8. National Borders and Narrative Form

From *Midnight's Children* to *A Suitable Boy*, we witness a return to a strong idea of the nation. From a period of questioning the solidity of boundaries in the post-colonial state, we move towards a progressive "solidification" of national borders. This progressive solidification of the nation's "reality" can be seen to correspond to major political changes in the decade or so between 1981 and 1993, that witnessed a steady erosion of the secular and multicultural nationalism espoused by Nehru. For a better understanding of the conceptual and imaginative shift in ideas of the nation from Rushdie to Seth, it is helpful to turn to Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988). This novel represents, in some ways, a third narrative solution to this shift in perception of India from a more broadly South Asian imagined entity (in *Midnight's Children*) to a firmly bounded national entity (in *A Suitable Boy*). The differences in Rushdie, Seth's

---

people come to be constructed within a double narrative movement: "[...] the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process." Homi Bhabha,

and Ghosh's narrative techniques can be illustrated by three examples from the texts.

There is a scene in *Midnight's Children* when Saleem magically crosses the border from Dhaka, Bangladesh to Delhi, India in a wicker basket, thanks to the incantations of his friend Parvati the witch: "Without passport or permit, I returned, cloaked in invisibility, to the land of my birth" (MC 381). The episode is recounted in the mode of magical realism, with supernatural happenings narrated as if they were commonplace reality. National borders, in Saleem's story, are almost an irrelevance; and from the Muslim perspective from which he tells his story, these national borders *are* effectively less significant than for other communities. All three South Asian nations he visits—India, Bangladesh, Pakistan—have a sizable Muslim population, though of course in India they are a (large) minority. The fact that Saleem crosses borders in a wicker basket, and literally disappears from Dhaka to reappear in Delhi, is an allegory of the diasporic fortunes of his family, and indeed of many South Asian Muslims. The Sinais move from Delhi to Bombay, and finally to Karachi in Pakistan. Saleem makes a further "move" to Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) as a member of the Pakistani Army that invaded East Pakistan in 1971. The narrator is more able to question the inviolability of national borders and the reality of the nation because he belongs to a minority that has become transnational after Partition and the creation of Pakistan; and his choice of narrative mode, magical realism, aptly conveys this.

---

"DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation", *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 297.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the first-person narration is not shot through with supernatural occurrences as in *Midnight's Children* and cannot be said to be “unreliable” to the same extent, but it presents a highly subjectivized perspective nevertheless. The borders between South Asian states are *shadow lines*, in the sense that they are not visible, but they have been imagined into being. In this sense they are fictive and could renegotiated or replaced by a different imagining. Unlike Saleem, the narrator is more “Indian” than South Asian. The narrator’s grandmother is a staunch nationalist, who says to her grandson that once members of a nation have drawn their borders in blood, “people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood.”<sup>44</sup> She is unconsciously identifying religion with nationality, in the peculiar conflation that characterizes nationalist spirit in India after Partition. Those who live in “her invented country” are Hindus, and “the enemies” she must rescue her uncle from, are Muslims, the inhabitants of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). The extent to which she assigns objectivity to her imagined community becomes clear when she asks her son whether she will be able to *see* the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane: “[S]urely there’s something—trenches, perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don’t they call it no-man’s-land?”<sup>45</sup> When her son explains to her that there is no reassuringly visible dividing line between the two countries, she is disconcerted:

But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where’s the difference then? And if there’s no difference both sides

---

<sup>44</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (1988; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 78.

<sup>45</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 151.

will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then—partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?<sup>46</sup>

Her son points out that the barriers will become clear enough once she has to go through customs, and she will be required to state her nationality, her place of birth, etc. She suddenly becomes confused about her identity: her place of birth does not correspond to her citizenship.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, in *A Suitable Boy*, published in 1993, realism shapes the consolidation of national borders in the sense that the reality of the nation is not questioned. Here the nation is an all-pervasive concept, that moves from the individual, to the locality, to the regional state, and arrives to embrace the entire nation. Seth invents a state, Purva Pradesh, whose regional, specifically North Indian dimension is stretched to make it representative of India in its totality:

[...] this little fire was indeed the centre of the universe. For here it burned, in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, which was the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which was itself the heartland of India... and so on through the galaxies to the outer limits of perception and knowledge. (ASB 16)

These three different metaphors of the nation display a correlation between the solidification of national boundaries through the use of realism on the part of the writers. In *Midnight's Children*, we have an unreliable narrator who narrates

---

<sup>46</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> "It was not until many years later that I realised that it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form, and that the prospect of this had worried her in the same way that dirty schoolbooks worried her—because she liked things to be neat and in place—and at the moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality." Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 152.

magic events as if they were commonplace occurrences. In *The Shadow Lines*, we have a self-doubting narrator who interrogates history, but strives to reconstruct a “precise imagination” of the past through memory and oral history. Finally, in *A Suitable Boy*, we have a third-person omniscient narrator whose telling has the verisimilitude and seamlessness of “objective” history.

These novels create an imagined community of readers who are not defined by national boundaries, but by the transnational scope of English. From within the secular genre of the novel, they articulate the conflicts between secular and religious identity which becomes a defining moment in establishing Indian identity. But whereas Seth’s secularism is Nehruvian, and relegates religion in the private sphere according to a rationalist orchestration of the secularism argument, Rushdie’s secularism is radical, in that it does not subordinate all worldviews to rationalist thought, but indeed uses the dialogic structure of the novel to stage the unresolved conflict between secular and religious worldviews. As the narrator says in *The Satanic Verses*:

Question: What is the opposite of faith?  
Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief.  
Doubt.<sup>48</sup>

### 0.9. The thesis structure

The first chapter, “Theories of Secularism”, lays out the theoretical groundwork for the two conceptions of secularism present in *Midnight’s Children* and *A Suitable Boy*. Whereas *A Suitable Boy* adopts a rationalist or transcendent perspective on religion which is much in line with Nehru’s relegation of religion

---

<sup>48</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988; repr. New York: Holt and Company, 1997), 94.

to the private sphere, *Midnight's Children* articulates a secularist perspective enunciated from minority positions, and radicalizes the discrepancy between rationalist secular and religious worldviews by refusing to subsume the latter into the former. I show how radical secularism emerges from Said's "secular criticism" and comes to define a subject-position which attempts to bridge the gap between "modern" (i.e. rationalist secular) and "non-modern" (i.e. religious) worldviews. The dialogic form of the novel is discussed here as a communicative mode between these different worldviews.

The second chapter, "Secularism and Minority", maps these two secular positions, the rationalist and radical, in the two novels. I explore how in *A Suitable Boy*, the third-person omniscient narrator subsumes the conflicting religious worldviews of the communities represented in the novel into his secular rationalist perspective. Rationalist secularism is read as a form of "mythology" in Roland Barthes's sense of the term. In *Midnight's Children* the first-person narrator continually oscillates between belief and skepticism, displaying a wariness of any fixed belief which rejects any ideological hierarchy between religious and secular imaginings of the nation.

The third chapter, "Types of Allegoresis in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*" examines how the novels present two versions of allegoresis, or configuration of events into a narrative. *A Suitable Boy* can be read as a "symbolic allegoresis": it is a symbolic-mimetic representation of the nation, in the sense that it enacts a naturalistic correspondence between empirical and fictional time, and between a fictional and empirical India. *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, can be read as an "allegorical" allegoresis: the narrator Saleem Sinai functions as the allegorical sign of India, that differs from its literal

meaning and has as its function the thematization of this difference. These two different forms of allegoresis are connected to Seth's use of realism and Rushdie's subversion of it. The novels project two contrasting forms of temporality: on the one hand, the painstaking historicist reconstruction of Seth's narrative of origins, and on the other, the temporal discrepancies of Saleem's narrative, characterized by constant digressions and faulty memories of the past.

The fourth chapter, "The Historical Event in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*", looks at the different emplotments of Indian historical events in the two novels, by relating them to other South Asian historiographical trends such as nationalist history and the Subaltern Studies school of historians. *Midnight's Children* foregrounds the underlying narrativity of "historical" events and the allegorical foundation, of the history that event is a part of. I discuss two intertextual sources for *Midnight's Children*: Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India* and Nehru's *The Discovery of India*. *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, far from questioning issues of representation, represents historical events such as the Zamindari Abolition Act and the "making" of a riot as important stages within a developmental narrative of the Indian nation-state.

The fifth chapter, "Languages of the Nation in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*", examines the interaction between English and the *bhasha* languages in the two novels. The polyphonic structure of *Midnight's Children* is linked to his use of an expressionistic Indian English, characterized by code-mixing between English and Urdu. The monologic structure of *A Suitable Boy* is characterized by a more uniform language, which translates almost all of the *bhasha* terms into English. Whereas in *Midnight's Children* appear as a studied babble of idiolects devoid of ideological hierarchy, in *A Suitable Boy* the different

social languages which make up the voices of the novel are composed into a “structured stylistic system” which reveals a more orderly—one could say statist—idea of the nation.

My conclusions hope to prove that these novels are strongly anchored to Indian political and cultural issues in their rendering of the complex negotiations between secular and religious, English and vernacular identity. However, they also point to a shift from Benedict Anderson’s canonical formulation of the novel as a genre that constructs an imagined national community to one that constructs a transnational imagined community. My analysis of Seth’s and Rushdie’s divergent representations of the nation-state—monologic and heteroglot—highlight the range of narrative solutions available to Indian writers in English while simultaneously showing up a common ideological background, that of Nehruvianism. The analytical emphasis on their engagement with Indian secularism aims to highlight its importance in the formation of South Asian postcolonial identity.



## Chapter One

### Theories of Secularism

*Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* address both a national and a transnational audience, because they are written in English. They can be read as historical novels, in the sense that they are both intimately caught up in the debate around secular and religious identities in the public sphere that gained increasing momentum in the India of the 80s and 90s. The progressive polarization of the public sphere into communal identities, a characteristic of recent South Asian politics, has produced new versions of Pakistani/Indian narratives seeking to organize national history along religious lines. In India, the rise of the Hindu right has resulted in a sidelining of secular nationalism, based on the idea of a composite national culture, in favor of Hinduized versions of it.<sup>1</sup>

Both novels have a strong Nehruvian matrix, though each presents a different perspective on this debate, which is articulated in two distinct understandings of the term “secularism” in the novels. A theoretical definition of “secularism” in a political context is given here by Donald E. Smith:

The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Attacks on the idea of secular nationalism have not come only from the right, but also from the left. Several historians belonging to the *Subaltern Studies* collective have effectively critiqued the discursive premises of secular nationalism, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* and Partha Chatterjee in his essay “Secularism and Tolerance”, *Secularism and Its Critics*, 345-379.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 4.

The different secular perspectives adopted by Rushdie and Seth reflect their responses to the rather different political situations in India at the time of writing. Rushdie writes his novel at the time of the Emergency, when repression of democratic debate was at its height due to political censorship of the press and the jailing of the multifarious opposition to the Indira Gandhi government. His perspective on the nation juxtaposes as many voices as possible representing constitutive elements of what is the Indian nation, and indeed extends its geographical scope beyond borders; Saleem's history of India includes Kashmir, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. A radical juxtaposition of worldviews and belief systems is staged in the novel as well, without the perceived necessity for a resolution in any sense. *Midnight's Children* recalls, as we shall see, Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of Dostoevsky's works as polyphonic novels, in which "the life experience of the characters and their discourse may be resolved as far as plot is concerned, but internally they remain incomplete and unresolved."<sup>3</sup>

*A Suitable Boy* was written at a time in which Hindu nationalism was on the rise, and secular nationalism, hitherto a guiding source of ideological inspiration for Indian political leaders since Independence, was increasingly under suspicion as an expedient way of conceiving the Indian nation. *A Suitable Boy* depicts the conflicting factions in the Congress Party that advocated different approaches to the communal problem in the aftermath of Partition, one more conservative, represented by Vallabhbhai Patel and Purushottamdas Tandon, and one more liberal, represented by Nehru. But the narrative voice

---

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Austin Press, 1981), 349.

endorses Nehru's approach, based on tolerance and state protection of minorities, as the most viable one. The emphasis of the novel is on communal unity, and the importance of relegating religion outside the public sphere in order to promote tolerance and a multi-cultural state, all of which were ideals strongly endorsed and promoted by Nehru in his role as the first Prime Minister of India.

In order to define the relationship of the two novels to the ongoing debate on secularism in South Asia, in this chapter I outline the historical evolution of Indian secularism and offer two theoretical perspectives on it. These two theoretical perspectives can be divided into the concepts of "rationalist" and "radical" secularism. By the first type I mean the relegation of religious belief to the private sphere and the construction of the public sphere as a realm of "reason".<sup>4</sup> Rationalist secularism indicates the prevalence of a scientific temper, a rationalization of the worldview of the individual, and the reduction of religious belief to affect. This rationalist or transcendent secularism is the discourse that formed the basis of state secularism in India after Partition. My use of the word "transcendental" to define the subordination of belief to the claims of reason is partly derived from Gauri Viswanathan's analysis of the public sphere in nineteenth-century Britain:

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Jürgen Habermas, the idea of the bourgeois public sphere as constituted by the communication of rational beings was most fully developed by Immanuel Kant: "The 'world' in which the public was constituted designated the realm of the public sphere [...] in all its purity world was constituted in the communication of rational beings [...] 'world' here pointed to humanity as species, but in that guise in which its unity presented itself in appearance: the world of a critically debating reading public that at the time was just evolving within the broader bourgeois strata." Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 106.

Civil society emerged as the privatized domain onto which were displaced a variety of religious distinctions that had no place in political society, or in what came to be construed as the more *transcendent* plane of secularism. Secularization not only polarizes national and religious identity; it also privatizes belief and renders it subordinate to the claims of reason, logic, and evidence. Henceforth all these claims are identified with the rationality of the state and its institutions.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of radical secularism is premised on the idea of Edward Said's secular criticism as an anti-totalizing activity. It is applied to the South Asian situation by Aamir Mufti, who conceives of it as an attempt to go *beyond* the rationalist premises of Nehruvian secularism. Secular criticism is an invitation to rethink, from within the postcolonial present, the narrative of progress that underlies the very notion of secularization. Thus "the terms of Nehruvian secularism itself have to be turned against it with the demand that it 'secularize' itself."<sup>6</sup>

Both the development and questioning of Nehru's rationalist premises find a particularly fertile space in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*. Dialogism, in particular, as a characteristic of the novel form, becomes an essential instrument for representing the tension between rationalist and radical secularism. The two texts explore the dialogic potential of the novel form in different ways. *Midnight's Children* radically juxtaposes worldviews within the "unreliable" narrative voice of Saleem Sinai, thus pushing dialogism to its extremes. *A Suitable Boy* presents a more "moderate" form of dialogism; it presents different perspectives on religion and rationality, but ultimately subordinates all religious claims in the public sphere to an over-arching

---

<sup>5</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 12. Italics added.

rationalist secularism.<sup>7</sup> In this sense Seth's third-person narrator is more monologic than Rushdie's narrator Saleem Sinai.

Ultimately my analysis hopes to show the tensions between these two positions within the two novels, that designate what Bhabha calls the "double temporality" of postcolonial identity formation. On the one hand, there is "the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation (the pedagogical)", and shaped by a secularism based on Enlightenment values articulated from a majoritarian position. On the other hand, there is "the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification", a reading of history which seeks to open up the rigidities of the secularist position, in other words, to dialogize it.<sup>8</sup>

Both novels are premised on a pluralist idea of the nation; clearly they stand out as non-sectarian narratives and they each represent a large number of different perspectives on Indian nationhood, "the one yet many of national life".<sup>9</sup> However their staging of the conflict between secular and religious positions differs quite radically. Generally it can be said that *A Suitable Boy's* more monological structure is characterized by a majoritarian perspective on secularism, which derives in turn from a rationalist outlook. *Midnight's Children's* more polyphonic structure, on the other hand, articulates a secularist

---

<sup>6</sup> Aamir Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism and the Question of Minority Culture", *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998), 117.

<sup>7</sup> The construction of the public sphere in *A Suitable Boy* privileges rational debate in such a way as to unproblematically replicate the idea of the public sphere in Western philosophy: "The public of 'human beings' engaged in rational-critical debate was constituted into one of 'citizens' wherever there was communication concerning the affairs of the 'commonwealth'. Under the 'republican constitution' this public sphere in the political realm became the organizational principle of the liberal constitutional state. Within its framework, civil society was established as the sphere of private autonomy (everyone was permitted to pursue his 'happiness' in any way he thought useful)." Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 106-107.

<sup>8</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 153.

<sup>9</sup> "It was in the novel that previously foreign languages met each other on the same terrain, forming an unsettled mixture of ideas and styles, themselves representing previously distinct

perspective enunciated from minority positions, and radicalizes the discrepancy between rationalist secular and religious worldviews by refusing to subsume the latter into the former. I link Bakhtin's theorization of the novel form to the ways in which Seth and Rushdie structure their narratives about secular/religious conflict or confrontation in their novels, and finally see how Seth's monologic, transcendent form of secularism is linked to his use of a mimetic-symbolic representation of the nation. On the other hand, Rushdie's dialogic/polyphonic, radical form of secularism is linked to his use of the disjunctive trope of allegory.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In the first section, in order to situate the debate on secularism, I give a definition of what is commonly understood as the Indian variant of secularism. I discuss the reception of *The Satanic Verses* in India and Britain as an example of the contradictions inherent in Indian secularism when put into practice, and how it differs from British conceptions of secularism. I illustrate the common ideological premises of Indian secularism and rationalist secularism, and examine its difference from radical secularism. In the second section, I present a brief history of the secularization process in order to understand the premises of rationalist secularism in the Indian context. In the third section, I discuss Nehru's writing on nationalism which became the canonical secularist position, and adopted state policy in the post-Independence period in India. In the fourth section, I present critiques of rationalist secularism, and Aamir Mufti's and Gauri Viswanathan's reflections on Edward Said's secular criticism as a position that

---

peoples now forced to create the rationale for a common life." Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form", *Nation and Narration*, 50.

attempts to go beyond Enlightenment rationalism vis-à-vis religion. In the fifth section, I discuss translation and conversion as “communicative modes of action” that can bridge gaps between the rationalist and religious positions. In the sixth section, I discuss how dialogism can translate between religious and secular perspectives within the communicative framework of the novel. Dialogism emerges as an enabling textual mechanism for this translation between worldviews.

### 1.1. What is Indian secularism?

The concept of the Indian secular state evolved from the liberal democratic tradition of the West, as opposed, for example, to Marxist secularism, which is hostile to religion as such. As mentioned earlier, Donald E. Smith’s “classic” definition of the secular state is a state that guarantees freedom of religion, deals with an individual citizen irrespective of their religion, and does not have an official religion.<sup>10</sup> Smith rightly points out that no country in the world perfectly fits this definition of secularism; Great Britain, which can be regarded as a secular state in many respects, still has a state church. In India, secularism is intended differently from how it is conceived in Western political thought; not as an anti-religious state, but as a non-sectarian one. Amartya Sen remarks that in order for a state to be secular, it is not required to stay clear of religion

---

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *India as a Secular State*, 4.

altogether, but it must guarantee a basic symmetry of treatment to all religions and religious communities.<sup>11</sup>

The differences in the way in which state secularism is conceived in Britain and the way it is conceived in India finds a telling example in the “Rushdie affair”. The aftermath of the publication of *The Satanic Verses* shows the different value placed on literature and religious texts in a transnational “liberal” readership and the Muslim readers who took offence at the novel:

Much of the confusion caused in the West by the Islamic reaction to the book is due precisely to this failure of perception: the political life of *The Satanic Verses* in the Islamic world cannot be contained within the rubric of the novel.<sup>12</sup>

Van der Veer notes that what was going on in the Rushdie affair was precisely a clash between the construction of different kinds of community: for liberal opinion, the book-burning that went on in Bradford was “a straightforward rejection of the Enlightenment value of free speech. It places religious sentiment above that value.” Literature for the enlightened literary audience was as sacred as the Qur’an is for Muslims.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the Rushdie affair does not only show the different ways in which Muslims reacted to the publication of a blasphemous novel, but also the way in which the Indian state gave a different

---

<sup>11</sup> Amartya Sen, “Secularism and Its Discontents”, *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India’s Secular Identity*, ed. Kaushik Basu and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996), 14. Sen makes the example of hospital endowments from the state. The state may decide not to support any hospital with any religious connection whatsoever, or it may decide to support *all* hospitals, without discriminating between religious connections. While the former position may appear to be superficially more secular, the latter approach is *politically* quite secular because it supports hospitals irrespective of whether or not there are religious connections, and in this way, it keeps the state and religions quite separate.

<sup>12</sup> Aamir Mufti, “Reading the Rushdie Affair: ‘Islam’, Cultural Politics, and Form”, *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism and the Public Sphere*, ed. Richard Burt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 330.

<sup>13</sup> Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 188-189.



interpretation to secularism from the British state. In Britain the book was not banned:

Instead, [Muslims] found that the project of the British state was not only to make them British citizens but to transform their moral identities. Englishness had to come first, before being Muslim. In a multicultural society one does not have to become a nonbeliever, but religious identity is a private matter in civil society, not a collective matter in political society. While these ideas were prevalent in India, the politics were more those of accommodation than integration.<sup>14</sup>

India, on the other hand, was the first country to ban *The Satanic Verses*:

The difference in reaction suggests that, despite the colonial project to introduce India to modernity, the novel, or literature in its modern, secular sense, is in India not as sacred as a religious text, like the Qu'ran.<sup>15</sup>

In Indian political usage, secularism acquired its present meaning because of its adoption as a state ideology by Nehru and the Congress Party in the years after Independence. Nehru's conception of the Indian nation, as laid out in his "foundational fiction", *The Discovery of India*, was inclusive, based on the idea of India as a "composite culture".<sup>16</sup> The multicultural thrust of Nehru's nationalism provides the ideological matrix from which Seth's and Rushdie's otherwise divergent secular narratives of the nation are constructed.

---

<sup>14</sup> Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalita define Nehru's *The Discovery of India* as a "foundational fiction" of the nation, in the sense that it can be regarded as preparing the ground for national projects that would be considered political in the more conventional sense. *The Discovery of India* used a composite genre to write about India, mixing autobiography, social analysis, and the re-writing of imperialist history within a nationalist framework; "the reader-citizen whom Nehru (who as 'author' is himself also defined by his text) addresses the new Indian-in-the-making. Communities, like readers and viewers, are gathered and shaped through address." Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, "The Twentieth Century: Women Writing the Nation", *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, ed. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 51-52.

In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru constructed a secular past for India in order to show that religious and cultural tolerance was at the basis of Indian civilization. Against earlier nationalist historiography, that privileged the Hindu chauvinist interpretation of Indian history, Nehru promoted an idea of India as a

secular entity, not a Hindu nation, that had cradled a variety of religions and sects through centuries, and had acquired a degree of unity while surviving conquests and conflicts. His *Discovery of India* was a documentation of this unity through history; and for him the nationalist movement was designed to free this unity so that India could join the world-historical march towards modernity.<sup>17</sup>

The nationalist rewriting of Indian history along secular lines was to provide the basis for secularism as a political practice in post-Independence years, at least until the rise of Hindu extremism in politics in the late 1980s<sup>18</sup>. At the center of Indian secular state ideology was not an irreligious or anti-religious state, but rather a non-sectarian state, which did not privilege one religion over another. The Congress concept of secularism can be summed up in the Sanskrit expression *sarva dharma samabhava*= “all religions should be treated equally”.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32:2 (April 1990), 389.

<sup>18</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj identifies the cause of the gradual erosion of the secular political project in India with a failure on the part of the elite to continue the cultural construction of the nation after the end of the nationalist struggle: “The ideology of nationalism gradually converted itself from an ideology of the people into an ideology of the state, or to put it more cynically, into a Central subject. And the state, which in the best of circumstances, is not a good conversationalist, decided according to its internal logic to withdraw the reproduction of nationalist ideology from the field of political discourse. It converted, according to its own perverted definitions, what was an issue of discourse into a simple issue of power.” Sudipta Kaviraj, “On the Discourse of Secularism”, *Secularism and Indian Polity*, ed. Bidyut Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Segment Book Distributors, 1990), 194.

<sup>19</sup> This definition is in contrast with the definition of secularism given by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which promotes a pro-Hindu position in politics (India’s current Prime Minister, Atal Vajpayee, belongs to this party): *dharma nirapekshata*= “neutral stance towards all religions”. The BJP promotes neutrality, rather than equality, towards other religions. In policy terms, this means that the BJP is against special concessions to the rights of minority groups, such as the

Nehru, in identifying secularism as the only approach which would guarantee the development of a truly integrated nation, said that it did not mean “absence of religion, but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life. Any other approach in India would mean the breaking up of India.”<sup>20</sup>

Nehru, as a rationalist, thought religion should gradually be relegated entirely to the private sphere, and denied a space in the public arena. The role of religion in state-formation and nation-building appears ambivalent, to say the least, in the Indian Constitution, which provides for different civil codes for Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and Christians.<sup>21</sup> Nehru did not envisage an immediate and complete withdrawal of the state from religious affairs. He thought of the separation between church and state as a gradual process, and that the different personal law provisions for the majority community and the minorities such as Muslims and Christians would gradually be phased out in favor of a uniform civil code. But this not yet happened to date.<sup>22</sup>

---

Muslims’ being entitled to be judged according to a different personal law from the Hindus. In some ways the difference between the BJP and the Congress positions resembles the two possible approaches to hospital endowments pointed out by Sen, the first superficially secular, the second politically so.

<sup>20</sup> Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 331.

<sup>21</sup> The equality of the individual citizen before the law is guaranteed by article 15(1) of the constitution, which says that “the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.” *Constitution of India*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Allahabad: Law Publishers, 2000), 21. In the case of the Muslim community, however, the constitution still recognizes the rights of religious communities over and above individual rights. A famous case in point was that of the Muslim woman Shah Bano who sued for alimony from her divorced husband, though according to Muslim law she was not entitled to it. But she appealed under a section of the Indian Criminal Code (the same for all communities) designed to prevent vagrancy; the Supreme Court upheld her appeal, but ultimately the Prime Minister at the time, Rajiv Gandhi, over-ruled it with an Act of Parliament that declared that such matters would hereafter be decided within the Muslim community (the Muslim Women’s Act). See Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “Shahbano,” *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 257-279.

<sup>22</sup> The problem in the present political situation is that the request for a uniform civil code, which women’s groups have been requesting in the name of women’s rights and equality, has been

The difficulties of implementing a secular state in India were of course manifold. The ideal of a syncretic, tolerant civilization, propounded both by Nehruvian nationalism and, more recently, by the anti-secular critic Ashis Nandy, was at best optimistic in its depiction of inter-community relations in the pre-colonial past.<sup>23</sup> The fact that Hindus and Muslims (and other religious groups) had “neighborly relations” for long periods, does not mean that they revelled in social intermixing.<sup>24</sup> The idea that the syncretic culture of pre-colonial India foreshadowed modern secularism, and that colonialism disrupted this communal harmony, is the product of a specifically nationalist idealizing representation of the past.<sup>25</sup> In recent times, communal discourse has attempted to construct a different history for the nation, organizing it on the lines of religious divides. Thus in the present situation it has become imperative for secularism to attempt a critical engagement with a religious worldview, without denying the possibility of a dialogical relation between the two positions.

---

made by the BJP into an important item on its political agenda. Thus feminists are in the uncomfortable position of occupying the same stance on the request for a uniform civil code as the Hindu right. However, though the BJP mimics “some of the liberal and feminist arguments defending a uniform civil code and rest their case on ‘gender justice’ and ‘secularism’, their anti-Muslim bias is pronounced, and a closer examination reveals that their version of gender justice is no more than a pragmatic design for a moderate Hindutva.” Kumkum Sangari, “The Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 30:51 (Dec. 23, 1995), 3287. Given the fraught politics of asking for a uniform civil code, which could seem to over-ride the rights of communities in favor of a state-led Hinduizing reform of personal law, some theorists have argued for “reverse optionality”: “that is, all citizens to be mandatorily covered by a gender-just code across ‘private’ and ‘public’ domains, but with the option to choose rather to be governed by the personal law of their religious community.” Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “Women between Community and State: Some Implications of the Uniform Civil Code Debates in India”, *Social Text* 65, 18:4 (Winter 2000), 64.

<sup>23</sup> See Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance”, *Secularism and Its Critics*, 321-344.

<sup>24</sup> Kaviraj, “On the Discourse of Secularism”, 189.

<sup>25</sup> Nehru says that “the whole history of India was witness of the toleration and even encouragement of minorities and of different racial groups. There is nothing in Indian history to compare with the bitter religious feuds and persecutions that prevailed in Europe. So we did not have to go abroad for ideas of religious and cultural toleration; these were inherent in Indian life.” Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 387.

A rationalist discourse informs the secularism of *A Suitable Boy*, premised as it is quite explicitly on a Nehruvian notion of politics and civil society, and emphasizing the importance of the separation between religion and politics. The novel's rationalist perspective is highlighted by the realist narrative mode and the construction of distinct public and domestic narratives within the plot. A much more radical interpretation of secularism is to be found in *Midnight's Children*. By radical secularism, I mean a critique which attempts to "localize" transcendent secularism and its universalizing tendencies. It is a secularism which attempts to take into account religious belief as a valid worldview not always already subordinated to the claims of reason. In radical secularism, myth and belief are potentially equally valid cultural metanarratives as the meta-discourse of rationalist secularism. Most importantly, radical secularism attempts to foreground the problem of language and mediation; when passing from a rationalist secular worldview to a religious one, there is no overarching metalanguage that carries over from the first to the second. Therefore it becomes necessary to bridge the gaps between worldviews through other means, not through a universal language based on rationality; notions like translation, conversion and dialogism, as we shall see, are essential heuristic tools, or viable modes of "communicative action", to move between these worlds.<sup>26</sup> Radical secularism emerges out of a critique of secularism as it developed historically both in Britain and in India. It is useful to turn to an analysis of the historical process of secularization to better understand the premises of rationalist secularism.

---

<sup>26</sup> David Krieger defines methodological conversion as "communicative action." See Krieger, "Conversion: On the Possibility of Global Thinking in the Age of Particularism", *Journal of the*

### 1.2.1. Secularization and National Identity in Britain and India

The process of secularization was instrumental in establishing an ideological hierarchy where reason was to subordinate religious belief to its own claims. In order to illustrate the specifics of the Indian process of secularization, I briefly trace the parallel historical trajectory of secularism in Britain and India. To this end, I refer to Gauri Viswanathan's account of historical secularization in Britain in her book on conversion and belief, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*. In India, early anticolonialism and nationalism were influenced by religious sensibilities, also due to the colonial strategy of enumeration on the basis of community and the granting of "communal" electorates.<sup>27</sup> Only in the 1920s and 1930s, the historian Gyan Pandey suggests, did a more secularized, or to be precise, non-sectarian, concept of nationalism emerge. The passage from a more community-based nationalism to one based on the concept of Indian citizenship also involved a shift from the rationalization of Hindu tradition as a distinctive trait of Hindu identity to the development of a more inclusive and non-sectarian nationalism.

In her study of British secularization, Viswanathan defines secularization thus:

Historical secularization redraws the boundaries of the self that were once placed around religious doctrine or belief, but now repositions them around the affiliative terms of nationhood, citizenship, and the doctrine of rights [...]. In secularization, one set of self-definitions drawn from an

---

*American Academy of Religion* 58:2 (Summer 1990), 238.

<sup>27</sup> Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, 123-24.

ecclesiastical domain gives way to another drawn from a temporal, legal sphere.<sup>28</sup>

Viswanathan aims to give a “genealogical account of the English tolerationist state from its colonial provenance.” She thus recounts the secularization of the British state as a parallel development to Macaulay’s influence on English educational policy in India, “essentially a secular project to transform Indians into deracinated replicas of Englishmen, even while they remained affiliated to their own religious culture.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, she says, the transformation of Hindus into non-Hindu Hindus, of Muslims into non-Muslims, and so forth, was a parallel colonial development to the social and political transformation of formerly disenfranchised groups such as Jews, Dissenters and Catholics into non-Jewish Jews, non-Catholic Catholics and so forth. Indeed, what the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed was a progressive internal articulation of national identity into private and public spheres; but there was no longer an unquestioned equation of Englishness with mainstream Anglicanism. Thus, Viswanathan argues, by the mid-nineteenth century with doctrinal allegiances no longer determining Englishness, national identity required a differentiation between political and civil society.

Viswanathan lays out the implications of the overlap between a secular educational policy in the colonies, and the decline of ecclesiastical authority in England. This concurrence of events, among other things, introduced a politics of identity in British political life, “where the grounds for Englishness are increasingly determined by the individual’s ability to become detached from the

---

<sup>28</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 5.

*content* of local or regional affiliations while maintaining their form.”<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, “the strengthening of the English state is predicated not by a single unified framework of ecclesiastical or missionizing doctrine but by the absorption of racial and religious ‘others’ into a secular, pluralistic fabric.”<sup>31</sup> On the other, the necessary assimilation of formerly disenfranchised groups in order to be included in the British state entailed, to some extent, the effacement of their religiosity, while at the same time the state guaranteed their rights to property, conjugality, and citizenship.

### 1.2.2. Early Indian Nationalism

From Viswanathan’s analysis, it is clear that historical secularization in Britain involved the separation of national identity from religious identity. But what of secularization in the Indian Empire? Secularization in India was inextricably linked to the growth of reformist and nationalist movements in the mid to late nineteenth century, and yet its trajectory obviously follows a very different pattern from that of Britain. Here I draw on Partha Chatterjee’s influential theorizations of Indian nationalism, as well as on Gyan Pandey’s work on nationalism and communalism in the late imperial period.

First of all, according to Chatterjee, the construction of an Indian identity emerged out of an assertion of difference from the culture of the colonizer. This process was different from the way national identity evolved in nineteenth-century Britain, where it partly arose out of the negotiation between the state

---

<sup>30</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 13.



and minorities campaigning for inclusion, according to Viswanathan. Jewish admission into the British parliament consolidated the secular state by detaching religious qualifications from national identity. This separation between religious and national identity did not quite happen in the case of the Indian nationalist movement. Religious differences among Hindu and Muslim communities often reached points of severe conflict that interfered with what more secular-minded nationalist leaders perceived as the more urgent task of anticolonial struggle throughout the independence period.<sup>32</sup> If we follow the arguments of Chatterjee and of Pandey, there were different stages in the evolution of Indian national identity from the late nineteenth century to the later nationalist period.

In the late nineteenth century, Bengali nationalists such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay identified Indian difference from the colonizer in cultural terms, rooted in a distinct religious identity.<sup>33</sup> Hence Indian difference from the colonizer mainly drew sustenance from a new self-consciousness about the distinctiveness of Hindu culture, among the early nationalists.<sup>34</sup> Chatterjee proposes a model for Indian nationalism which internally differentiated national identity into two domains, the material and the spiritual. National identity was premised on a difference from the culture of the

---

<sup>32</sup> Pandey draws attention to the spate of riots that took place between Hindus and Muslims between the 1920s and 30s in India. See *The Construction of Communalism*, 234.

<sup>33</sup> In criticizing the Anglicized generation of English-educated Bengalis prominent in Bengali cultural and intellectual life of the late nineteenth century, Bankimchandra asks: "Who is the man amongst us who in personal purity, in meekness, in self-forgetfulness, in genuine non-political patriotic feeling, in tenderness for the least sentient thing, in lifelong and systematic devotion to knowledge and virtue for their own sake, can stand a moment's comparison with the better order of minds nurtured in the cradle of Hinduism?" Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "The Confession of a Young Bengal" (1872), *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, 23-24.

<sup>34</sup> Bankim's nationalist writing was characterized by a "barely concealed hostility towards Islam". See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*

colonizer; but the difference was primarily marked within the so-called spiritual domain of identity, which comprised the “inner” aspects of culture such as language or religion or the elements of personal and family life. Here the difference between the cultures of the colonized and the colonizer were emphatically foregrounded:

The more nationalism engaged in its contest with the colonial power in the outer domain of politics, the more it insisted on displaying the marks of “essential” cultural difference so as to keep out the colonizer from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty on it.<sup>35</sup>

The material, or outer domain of national identity, was of course a different matter. This, according to Chatterjee, comprised, law, administration, economy and statecraft—here, nationalism “fought relentlessly to erase the marks of colonial difference. Difference could not justified in that domain. In this, it seemed to be reasserting precisely the claims to universality of the modern regime of power.”<sup>36</sup>

If we follow Chatterjee’s model then, the early nationalists conceived of national identity in India as a dual structure, whose public “face” was dominated by the adoption of a Western rationality, and its private “face” by (Hindu) religion, tradition, culture. For the nationalists, the Westernization of the material domain was not intended to extend to the spiritual domain, otherwise the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened:

---

(London: Zed Books, 1986), 77. According to Bose and Jalal, Bankim’s novel *Ananda Math* “dripped with anti-Muslim prejudice”. See Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>36</sup> *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 26.

What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture.<sup>37</sup>

The nationalists' project of rationalizing and reforming the traditional culture of Bengalis rejected individualism as a "pernicious" Western value (Bankim defines it a "habit of heartless isolation"), and privileged narratives where the self was constructed in relation to the community, as in nineteenth-century autobiographies by high-caste Bengali women.<sup>38</sup>

Thus Indian national identity came to be structured in a completely different manner from the British. In Viswanathan's analysis, national identity became separated from religious belief, which was entirely relegated to the private sphere. In the early nationalist period, Hindu religion and culture became a distinctive and essential part of Indian identity. This cultural difference from Britain did not distinguish between religion and culture, unlike the separation between national and religious identity in the nineteenth-century British context. For the early Bengali nationalists, being Indian meant being Hindu, whereas in mid-nineteenth century Britain, Britishness was no longer necessarily equivalent to Anglicanism.

The nationalists endeavored to rationalize and classicize tradition in order to fashion it into a modern Indian identity, where the term "modern" was not equivalent to "Western". It was a process of partial secularization of Hindu tradition. This rationalization of tradition, on the part of Bengali nationalists at least, was at least in part an attempt to construct a Hindu identity for the

---

<sup>37</sup> *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 120.

Hindus as distinct from the identity of the colonizer, and which meant a self-consciousness of Hindu traditions, beliefs and customs. Self-consciousness of their Hinduness prompted nationalists to selectively appropriate and refurbish certain traditions and historical events, while discarding others as inappropriate or “backward” and constraining. Thus early Hindu nationalism is shown by Chatterjee to be a selection of traditions and events deemed to be most “representative” and most “innately” Hindu.

### **1.2.3. The development of secular nationalism**

A shift in the conception of national identity occurred within the nationalist movement, according to Pandey, between the 1920s and 1930. The difference between the first and the second stage involved a passage from the rationalization of Hindu tradition as a distinctive trait of Indian identity to the development of a secular nationalism. This second stage can also be described using Chatterjee’s model of the two domains, material and spiritual, but an important shift should be noted here. The spiritual domain, in the early nationalist period, collapsed religion and culture, and ultimately identified an Indian cultural essence with a Hindu cultural essence. In the later nationalist period, Indian cultural distinctiveness began to be premised on notions of an absorptive and syncretic civilization which assimilated many different religious and cultural influences—Mughal-Muslim, Parsi, Christian, etc—while retaining its “innate” character. But Indianness was no longer equated with Hinduism,

---

<sup>38</sup> This model of identity as a dual structure is clearly quite problematic for its rigid binarism, and indeed the distinction between the material and spiritual domains is much more shifting

and religion as a distinctive marker of difference from the colonizer began to be substituted by a more secular conception of Indian culture. The writings of Nehru on religion and nationalism bear this idea out, as we shall see further on. This is not to say that more inclusive forms of nationalism had not been forcefully proposed before the 1920s, nor is it say that more exclusive forms, like Hindutva, necessarily died out. Already in 1910 Gandhi affirmed that “India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it”, citing India’s faculty for assimilation as a necessary condition for a unified sense of nationality.<sup>39</sup>

From the 1920s onwards, the nationalists strove towards the construction of a secular ideal of the nation, beyond the “divisive” claims of religion, caste, community, or region. As Gandhi said in 1922, “Nationalism is greater than sectarianism [...] In that sense we are Indians first and Hindus, Mussalmans, Parsis, Christians after.”<sup>40</sup> Gandhi thought that the “non-essentials” of religion, i.e. the more exterior forms of Hindu and Muslim religious practice, for example the “sin” of untouchability, should be discarded in favor of a larger national unity.<sup>41</sup> For Pandey what is most striking about this process of secularization of nationalism was this

call to privatize religion (the separation of religion from politics, as we would put it today), the dissociation of the “nation” from any pre-existing communities and the construction of the purely national unambiguously, in terms of a new kind of community—the “India of our dreams”.<sup>42</sup>

---

than Chatterjee allows for.

<sup>39</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>40</sup> Gandhi, quoted in Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 238.

<sup>41</sup> Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 237.

<sup>42</sup> Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 239.

Yet in the history of the nationalist movement, there is no linear evolution from community to nation in the sense of an abandonment of preceding local, caste, religious, communal loyalties for a secular nationalist ideal—the country—which lay beyond these “divisive” allegiances. The “backward” and “primitive” spectre of communalism persisted, despite all the efforts of the nationalists to discredit it. The difficulty the nationalist movement had in dealing with sectarian strife, including that within the Congress Party between the Patel and the Nehru factions, was ultimately the catalyst for the Partition of the subcontinent. Hence secularization in India co-existed and still co-exists uneasily with “communalism”, and indeed, some like Ashis Nandy would argue, they represent two faces of the same coin. The theories of secular nationalism and the subsequent historical explanations it gave for the tragedy of Partition reveal the gaps between its ideals and its practice, which ultimately failed to account for the driving force of “communalism” in the subcontinent.

This very brief account of evolution of Indian nationalist discourse shows that unlike Viswanathan’s account of secularization in Britain, in India there was no comparable quarantining of religion from politics, and of religious identity from national identity, though the efforts of secular nationalists like Nehru strove to achieve this separation, both in theory and in practice. There is a clear link between this detachment of religious identity from national identity in Britain and the European construction of the subject as split between a public and private self. European nationalism developed a discourse of citizenship and the rights of the individual in the public sphere whose counterpoint was the ideology of individualism in the private sphere. But when the idea of

nationalism took hold in India, it was radically transformed, and most notably in the construction of the self vis-à-vis the nation.<sup>43</sup>

According to Chakrabarty, national identity in India did not evolve out of the split between public and private self the way it did in Europe. Pandey argues that the nationalists after the 1920s tended to conceive of the imagined political community in terms of citizens, i.e. individuals making up the nation-state, rather than of *communities* making up the nation-state. The Congress's field of work was to be purely national, and the question of religious and caste rights should have no place in it. This language of the "purely national", Pandey writes,

raised the concept of the Indian nation to another level and pushed its foundations beyond the great individuals in history, beyond the religious communities, beyond caste.<sup>44</sup>

This narrative of the nation saw it as a transcendent ideal whose essential unity the nationalist elite had grasped, but which remained "undiscovered" by the majority of the common people.<sup>45</sup> But such a narrative left no room for

---

<sup>43</sup> Chakrabarty explains the crucial difference between the construction of Indian and European national identity in the following terms: "But if one result of European imperialism in India was to introduce the modern state and the idea of the nation with their attendant discourse of 'citizenship', which, by the very idea of 'the citizen's rights' (that is, 'the rule of law'), splits the figure of the modern individual into public and private parts of the self [...] these themes have existed—in contestation, alliance, and miscegenation—with other narratives of the self and community that do not look to the state/citizen bind as the ultimate construction of sociality." Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 239.

<sup>45</sup> Discovery is a structural trope in Nehru's conception of nationalism. During his 1935 electoral campaign around the country, he tells the Indian peasants of his idea of India as *Bharat Mata*. India is much more than the land, he tells them, it is the millions of people living in India, including themselves, who make up this *Bharat Mata*: "[...] and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great *discovery*." (Emphasis added). Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 48.

an accommodation of local loyalties, for continued attachment to religion, or even appreciation of the vigorous struggles that had been waged against these: nor much allowance for the class-divided and regionally diverse perceptions of the 'imagined community', out of the struggle for which Indian nationalism and the Indian national movement arose.<sup>46</sup>

Thus the Congress leaders such as Nehru ended up adopting a statist perspective on the nation which did not admit alternative narratives of the relationship between the people and their imagined political community. These alternative visions of India, such as those premised on a religious basis, had been labeled as communalist, i.e. the opposite of "truly" nationalist, since the early 1920s. Religion, in the nationalist vision, was to be subordinated to the claims of nationalism, much as it had been in the process of historical secularization in Britain.

It is of course undeniable that Gandhi effectively mobilized mass participation in the independence movement through the deployment of religious concepts and symbols, albeit made flexible to accommodate the participation from different religious communities. The subordination of religion to the claims of nationalism is also very much a product of Nehru's rationalistic and scientific ideological background. Both *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* are direct inheritors of Nehru's rationalist legacy, while significantly, Gandhi's utopian and collectivist political vision, which involves a critique of modern civilization as it was imported into India and a rejection of historicism, rationality, and the scientific mode of knowledge that other

---

<sup>46</sup> Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 253.



nationalist writers endorsed, does not appear in either of their novels.<sup>47</sup> Both Nehru and his secular thought, on the other hand, are central to both novels.

### 1.3. Nehru's Rationalist Secularism

Nehru's writing on nationalism clearly demonstrates a rationalist and individualistic approach to religion. He provides us with a good working definition of a "rational" or "transcendent" secularism that underscores Seth's secular perspective in *A Suitable Boy*, and provides a perspective to engage with for Saleem in *Midnight's Children*. In his teleological view of the development of the Indian nation-state, Nehru says that the religious outlook on life, so pervasive in the subcontinent, must gradually be phased out and relegated to the private sphere. Indeed, religion is seen by Nehru as a major cause of delay for India's development:

The belief in a supernatural agency which ordains everything has led to a certain irresponsibility on the social plane, and emotion and sentimentality have taken the place of reasoned thought and inquiry. Religion, though it has undoubtedly brought comfort to innumerable human beings and stabilized society by its values, has checked the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society.<sup>48</sup>

Elsewhere Nehru, in identifying secularism as the only approach which will guarantee the development of a truly integrated nation, says that it does not

---

<sup>47</sup> An example of a Gandhian novel is Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), which presents a religious imagining of the national community through a village microcosm. The novel represents very well the way Gandhism did not repudiate religion, but rather, from within a theocratic framework, it sought to transform the mentality of "traditional" India towards untouchability and caste barriers. Ultimately, however, the village is destroyed by the advent of anticolonial struggle, an ending that would seem to emphasize the utopianism of Gandhi's project.

<sup>48</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 524.

mean “absence of religion, but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life. Any other approach in India would mean the breaking up of India.”<sup>49</sup> However, for Nehru, putting religion on a different plane from political and social life implies a subordination of religion to reason. It is clear from Nehru’s writing that he is a rationalist; he concedes faith may have some value for an individual in a very general, almost abstract sense, and he groups religious faith into an undifferentiated category together with any belief in a higher ideal in life.<sup>50</sup> But only knowledge can yield a true emancipation of the spirit, thereby shrinking the domain of religion “in the narrow sense of the word.” His praise of the scientific approach extends far beyond the material domain and invests every aspect of life:

It is the scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on preconceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind—all this is necessary, not merely for the application of science but for life itself and the solution of its many problems.<sup>51</sup>

The scientific approach is conceived as directly opposed to the “narrowly” religious one, which relies on emotion and intuition, and produces “narrowness and intolerance, credulity and superstition, emotionalism and irrationalism. It tends to close and limit the mind of man, and to produce a temper of a

---

<sup>49</sup> Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, 331.

<sup>50</sup> “Whether we are conscious of it or not, most of us worship at the invisible altar of some unknown god and offer sacrifices to it—some ideal, personal, national, or international; some distant objective that draws us on, though reason itself may find little substance in it; some vague conception of a perfect man and better world.” Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 527.

<sup>51</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 525.

dependent, unfree person.”<sup>52</sup> Nehru’s writing is useful to define the contours of what is meant here by transcendent or rationalist secularism, especially in the Indian context, but not exclusively. Rationalist secularism is the prevalence of a scientific temper, a rationalization of the worldview of the individual, and the reduction of religious belief to “sentiment and affect”, in Viswanathan’s words. This shrinking of religion into sentiment and affect characterizes many secularized societies. The legal definition of blasphemy in Western societies is a case in point. Viswanathan contends that blasphemy nowadays, in Western societies, is more a discourse of rights than of creed or belief. This is a reflection of the extent to which culture has usurped the function of religion; religious difference, in modern multicultural societies like Britain, is defended only because it signifies *cultural* difference:

The sympathy for “wounded sentiments” is a permissible secular gesture that has the special virtue of not pandering to the religious absolutism on which those sentiments may be based. If tolerance is obliged to protect the rights of all communities, its privileging of the subjectivity of sentiment over the objectivity of creed steers clear of antiheretical presumptions while still holding fast to the ideal of cultural relativism.<sup>53</sup>

The substitution of religion with an idea of national culture was also affected by Nehru, where the distinctiveness of the spiritual domain was no longer defined by the *Hindu religion* as with the nineteenth-century Hindu nationalists, but by *Indian culture*: “Nationalism is essentially a group memory of past achievements, traditions, and experiences, and nationalism is stronger today than it has ever

---

<sup>52</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 526. Nehru scholars warn against interpreting Nehru’s stance on secularism entirely through his writing without considering his political praxis; this, argues Sunil Khilnani, has led to an excessive codification of Nehruvian secularism as a set dogma. See Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 251.

been.”<sup>54</sup> A later generation of Indian theorists would embark on a wholesale critique of Nehruvian secularism, offering different interpretations of why it had failed as a political and ideological strategy for postcolonial India.<sup>55</sup>

#### 1.4.1. Critiques of Rationalist Secularism: Mitra and Nandy

One of these theorists, the political scientist Subrata Mitra, argues that to a large extent, Nehru’s effort to keep religion out of the public sphere was unsuccessful. He finds that in India, modernization and secularization have worked at cross purposes. He comments that “India is virtually alone among the post-colonial states in Asia to have adopted religious neutrality as a key feature of its Constitution and the cornerstone of the strategy for nation-building.”<sup>56</sup> Yet this secular stance has not brought about a progressive secularization of society, on the contrary: it has brought religion to the fore, as the success of the BJP has demonstrated. Mitra attributes this to the fact that Nehru’s secularist zeal went hand in hand with his determination to lay solid democratic foundations for the Indian state. Thus modernization could not be achieved with strong-arm methods the way it was in the USSR, a non-democratic state.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the defining word “secular” for the Indian republic was only added to the Constitution during the Emergency, in 1976.

---

<sup>54</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 528.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Young suggests there is a possible link between Indian postcolonial criticism and the Emergency: “although it would be simplistic to suggest any direct connection, much of the innovative theoretical and political renewal carried out by Indian intellectuals that has resulted in it coming to occupy a dominant position in postcolonial critique, began in the period that followed Indira Gandhi’s notorious political experiment, the Emergency (1975-7).” Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 339.

<sup>56</sup> Subrata K. Mitra, *Culture and Rationality: The Politics of Social Change in Post-colonial India* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 91.

For Ashis Nandy, ideas of the nation-state and nationalism are important factors in outbreaks of communal violence (such as, for example, the language riots in Maharashtra recounted in *Midnight's Children*), because these ideas have reduced the range of options within Indian public life. Thus ethnic demands perceived to be outside the range of "normal" politics, are coercively contained by the state: "This in turn leads to deeper communal divides and to the perception of the state as essentially hostile to the interests of the aggrieved communities."<sup>58</sup> Indian secularism, given its strong statist connections, thus emerges as a part of the communal disease.

The problem, as Nandy sees it, is that secularism conceived in rationalistic terms tends to reduce belief to mere ideology, and in a society like India, such a reduction fails to address the pervasiveness of the religious worldview among the population, and its inevitable intersections with conceptions of political community. He distinguishes religion-as-faith from religion-as-ideology. By faith he means religion as "a way of life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural." By ideology he means religion as "a subnational, national, or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious interests like political or socio-economic ones."<sup>59</sup> He claims that modern secularists (what I would call rational secularists) conceive of religion only in terms of ideology, without taking it into account as a way of life for many people. Nandy links modern

---

<sup>57</sup> Mitra, *Culture and Rationality*, 98.

<sup>58</sup> Ashis Nandy, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (1995), in *Exiled At Home* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>59</sup> Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism", 322.

Indian secularism with the idea of the modern concept of selfhood acquired partly from the Western Enlightenment:

Religion-as-ideology, working with the concept of well-bounded, mutually exclusive religious identities, on the other hand, is more compatible with and analogous to the definition of the self as a well-bounded individuated entity clearly separable from the non-self.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas religion-as-belief, Nandy claims, is intimately linked with the way the self is conceptualized in South Asia. The self in South Asian cultures is much more fluid than the Western notion of selfhood: it “can be conceptually viewed as a configuration of selves” and “simultaneously shapes, invokes and reflects the configurative principles of religions-as-faiths.”<sup>61</sup> Nandy argues that much of today’s fanaticism and violence stems from a sense of defeat, impotency, and self-hatred on the part of believers who realize that their world is becoming increasingly secular. Religion-as-faith, to adopt Nandy’s terminology, goes far beyond mere ideology and is equivalent to a lifeworld which presents a discursive break from the rationalist argumentations of transcendent secularism.

What I propose to outline in the following section is a different idea of secularism that attempts to go beyond some of the aporias presented by rationalist secularism, namely radical secularism. I draw on the work of Aamir Mufti, Edward Said, Viswanathan, and Chakrabarty in order to articulate this notion of radical secularism. I start with Edward Said’s notion of secular criticism in *The World, The Text and the Critic*.<sup>62</sup> Then I look at Mufti and Viswanathan in order to see how they re-elaborate Said’s notion of secular

---

<sup>60</sup> Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism”, 325.

<sup>61</sup> Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism”, 325.

criticism as an anti-totalizing intellectual activity. The secular critic for Said mediates between secular and religious identity, a task of especial urgency in a postcolonial society like India.

#### **1.4.2. Critiques of rationalist secularism: the radical secularism of Said, Mufti, and Viswanathan**

Said explains the hegemony of a dominant culture through the concept of affiliation. The affiliative relationship between intellectuals replicates that of the filial bonds, of duty, respect, love, fear, by changing these bonds into apparently transpersonal ones: such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, and class. Said likens culturally hegemonic concepts such as the idea of the Orient or of the West, and the accompanying discourse of Orientalism, as having something in common with religious discourse, in the sense that “each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the otherworldly.”<sup>63</sup> Both culture and religion furnish society with systems of authority and canons of order that wish to compel adherence and a blind submission to their “faith”, whether a religious or a cultural set of beliefs. The role of the critic, in this case, is to question this affiliative order, by assuming a skeptical and secular stance to the system of culture, and to situate literature in the political, historical, social context of its production:

---

<sup>62</sup> Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1983).

<sup>63</sup> Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 290.

Criticism in short is always situated: it is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings. This is by no means to say it is value-free. Quite the contrary, for the inevitable trajectory of critical consciousness is to arrive at some acute sense of what political, social, and human values are entailed in the reading, production and transmission of every text. To stand between culture and system is therefore to stand *close to*—closeness itself having a particular value for me—a concrete reality about which political, moral, and social judgements have to be made and, if not only made, then exposed and de-mystified.<sup>64</sup>

Said identifies “ironic” and “oppositional” as the two words that would best describe secular criticism.<sup>65</sup> The critic, therefore, is the radically doubting skeptic of any totalizing system of belief. Aamir Mufti develops this line of Said’s thought to show that Said’s secular criticism is suspicious both of religion and what has become the “new” religion in the present geo-political context, the nation, often conflated with religion as such. Secular criticism seeks to dismantle the certainties of nationalism that have become like dogmas binding a certain set of believers, namely the national community.<sup>66</sup>

Mufti begins his re-interpretation of Said by refuting the charge many have leveled at Saidian secular criticism, namely that it is elitist. It is unquestionably true, Mufti says (and as we have seen previously), that the word “secular” has a long history of serving as

---

<sup>64</sup> Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 26.

<sup>65</sup> “If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma.” Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 29.

<sup>66</sup> For the narrator’s grandmother in Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* nationalism is conceptualized in terms of religion: “It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed [...] They know they’re a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood [...] War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what *you* have to achieve for India, don’t you see?” Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 78.



“a figure for the authority of a putatively universal reason, or (narratively speaking) as the ideal end-point of progress in the intellectual domain.” Hence its association with elitism and its rejection, in the present atmosphere of the critique of Eurocentrism, by scholars as diverse as Ashis Nandy and [Timothy] Brennan.<sup>67</sup>

However, this stance leads critics to treat all secularisms as formally equivalent. Mufti premises his entire essay on the thesis that there can be a form of secularism which is not merely a rehearsal of rationalist arguments about the subordination of all other worldviews to reason. Not all secularisms are formally equivalent. The type of secularism which Mufti proposes here is a secularism enunciated from *minority* positions. Secular as a term is no longer to be opposed to religion *per se* (or religion-as-ideology, as Nandy would have it), but to nationalism:

*Secular* implies for Said a critique of nationalism as an ideology of hearth and home, of collective *Gemütlichkeit*: a critique of the “assurance”, “confidence”, and “majority sense” that claims on behalf of national culture always imply; a critique of “the entire matrix of meanings we associate with ‘home’, belonging and community”.<sup>68</sup>

Thus Said’s use of the term (and even more strongly, Mufti’s) use of the term “secular” is catachrestic, namely a meaningful and productive *misuse*:

It is an invitation to rethink, from within the postcolonial present, the narrative of progress that underlies the very notion of secularization. It carries the insight that nationalism does not represent a mere transcending of religious difference [...] but rather its reorientation and reinscription along national lines.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 106.

<sup>68</sup> Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 107.

<sup>69</sup> Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 107.

Said's notion of secular criticism is strongly linked with the image of critical activity as the breaking of idols. But this critical posture is not merely a naïve trust in the traditions of Enlightenment as de-mystification; "the relationship of Said's critical practice to the Enlightenment is dialectical."<sup>70</sup> Thus Said's position cannot be simply identified with humanism. The secular critical consciousness must continuously maintain a skepticism about the transparency of Enlightenment claims to emancipation, without disallowing its possibility. Secular criticism, says Mufti, does not imply the rejection of universalism per se:

It implies a scrupulous recognition that all claims of a universal nature are particular claims. Furthermore, and most importantly, it means rescuing the marginalized perspective of the minority as one from which to rethink and remake universalist (ethical, political, cultural) claims, thus displacing its assignation as the site of the local.<sup>71</sup>

Viswanathan, interestingly, engages in a similar re-evaluation of Saidian secular criticism to that of Mufti, reaching similar theoretical conclusions.<sup>72</sup> Viswanathan comments on Said's "idiosyncratic" use of the term secular, which Mufti calls "catachrestic". For Said, a cultural discourse such as Orientalism can operate in the same way as a religious discourse, in that

each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the otherworldly.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 111-112.

<sup>71</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 112.

<sup>72</sup> It is also interesting that Viswanathan's book and Mufti's essay both appeared in 1998.

<sup>73</sup> Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 290.

Culture, having been substituted for religion as a knowledge-producing activity in the modern world, has inherited its authoritarian mode of disciplining knowledge. Saidian criticism, for its part,

compels a recognition of both culture and religion as systems of authority that operate in parallel ways to establish criteria for membership, command allegiance, and substitute shared values for individual critical consciousness.<sup>74</sup>

Skepticism and questioning are considered heresies in a religious order, but Said shows “how readily cultural criticism acquires a heretical cast, even in a supposedly secular climate, wherever revered cultural icons are challenged.” Said, in his practice of secular criticism, seeks to recover the oppositional quality of contemporary scholarship from the “guild mentality that enjoins unreflecting obedience to abstract notions like ‘nation’, ‘community’, ‘culture’, ‘citizen’, and the like.”<sup>75</sup>

The question of minority identity is linked to the exercise of a secular criticism, both in Viswanathan and in Mufti. One may be both a member of a minority group or religious sect *and* a member of a national collectivity, and this often produces a tension:

Said’s larger point, as I understand it, is that what is often at stake in dissent is resisting the transformation of criticism into either an act of citizenship—a performative gesture of citizenship in a self-selecting guild—or an act of withdrawal into a self-enclosed space of particularism or separatism.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 46. See also previous discussion on Said.

<sup>76</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 46.

The secular critic, speaking from a minority position in society, must avoid slipping into a sectarian mode while simultaneously resisting a citizenship function. In other words, s/he must mediate effectively between religious and national identity.

The role of the secular critic in mediating between religious and nationalist identity acquires an especial urgency in a postcolonial society like India. This is the place where Mufti situates his argument about majoritarian and minoritarian secularism. Though the two concepts are not entirely equivalent, majoritarian secularism shares many characteristics with transcendent secularism in the Indian context. This is because of the way Nehru theorized and practiced secularism, as premised on a rationalist framework that subordinated religion to reason. But majoritarian secularism, for Mufti, means Indian secular nationalism as articulated by Nehru and his concept of a state which must tolerate its minorities (in this sense it is majoritarian). However, Mufti includes in his notion of majoritarian secularism also Nandy's concept of tolerance, as articulated from a *religious* rather than secular standpoint.<sup>77</sup> What is the difference, Mufti asks, between Nehru's and Nandy's call for tolerance in a multi-religious society such as India? Both Nehru and Nandy recuperate the notion of cultural syncretism as an indigenous form of tolerance and coexistence:

The only difference here is that while Nandy wants to protect, preserve, and extend this syncretism, as the basis for a form of tolerance that is

---

<sup>77</sup> Nandy seeks to substitute the idea of a state secularism with the idea of religious tolerance in South Asia, claiming that "each major faith in the region includes *within* it an in-house version of the other faiths both as an internal criticism and as a reminder of the diversity of the theory of transcendence." Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism", 327.

religious and not secular, Nehru wants to see it transcended and sublated into a modern, rationalist secularism.<sup>78</sup>

But ultimately syncretism does not solve the problem of the relationship between majority and minority in modern political life:

no amount of talk of the plurality of 'traditions' on Indian soil can erase the fact that these traditions have come to us in modernity differently located within the nation-space and hence, differently and unequally authorized.<sup>79</sup>

Both Nandy and Nehru are guilty of conceiving of Indian culture exclusively as *Indic*, which absorbed Muslim religion and culture over the centuries and gradually Indianized it. This cultural perspective is still indubitably majoritarian. Such a majoritarian perspective is "incapable of seeing minority itself as a means of disrupting the majoritarian definitions of nation and state, as a site for the possible enunciation of secular claims upon state and society."<sup>80</sup>

Tolerance is a loaded concept in the context of the relationship between majority and minority. The notion of tolerance is at the basis of any formulation of a majoritarian secularism, but in the very notion of tolerance there is something intolerable.<sup>81</sup> It implies a liberty to not tolerate, and the implication of an inherent inequality in a society where tolerance is exercised:

when the majority speaks of tolerance, one should identify it as a "majority position" that is closed to the power differentials in a heterogeneous society, where tolerance is often the privilege of a dominant culture.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 115.

<sup>79</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 116.

<sup>80</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 116.

<sup>81</sup> Preston King, *Toleration* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

<sup>82</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 253.

Preston King draws attention to the fact that tolerance is a *liberty*, not a *right*; whereas a liberty is a “general capacity, socially protected, to perform or not perform in certain ways”, a right “is basically a moral *claim* (which may of course be legally codified) the object of which is normally regarded as a positive good, which should or must be secured or protected.” Since tolerance is not of itself a right, but a liberty, it does not necessarily have any moral claim to exist. The exercise of tolerance is merely an unhappy consequence of the fact that inequality is a chronic element of contemporary society; inequality will have been eliminated when tolerance can be done away with.<sup>83</sup> The way Nandy would have it, tolerance is an ideal; whereas its origin is rooted in inequality. Tolerance, therefore, is characteristic of a majoritarian secularism that it is urgent to deconstruct in order to re-define the relationship between minority and majority in the South Asian context; with specific reference to the Muslim minority versus the Hindu majority.<sup>84</sup>

What secular nationalism effectively did to a significant part of the Indian population (the part which then became Pakistani citizens) was to turn them into non-Indians (and today the propaganda of the Hindu right attempts to depict Indian Muslims as “non-Indians”). The task of critical scholarship today is to provide a conceptual framework for the rethinking of India in which “Muslim” does not function as a minority. The obverse of this critical imperative is that Pakistan be recognized as an *Indian*—and not merely as a

---

<sup>83</sup> King, *Toleration*, 24.

<sup>84</sup> “The Saidian critical imperative here is to continuously put ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ (and ‘Indian’ and ‘Pakistani’) in question, to make visible the dialectic of majority and minority within which they are produced, which constitutes the larger part of the movement of Indian

South Asian—polity: “The abstract, ‘secular’ citizen of postcolonial India has its *Entstehung*, its moment of emergence, in a violent redistribution of religious identities and populations.”<sup>85</sup> The task of secular criticism then is to deconstruct terms like Hindu and Muslim, majority and minority, Indian and Pakistani, citizen and alien, and to reveal the unfinished nature of this normalization operated by the state.

“Minority” is a fundamental category of liberal secular society. It can and should become the privileged position from which to rethink universalist categories:

Saidian secularism is based upon a scrupulous recognition that not only does minority does not disappear when we make it subject to a critique from the point of view of the universal, but it is precisely universalist categories that require its existence as the site of the local. Said demands that we critique this marginalized, threatened (and threatening) existence precisely by inhabiting it, that we make it the position from which to enunciate claims of an ethical, cultural, political nature.<sup>86</sup>

Radical secularism—Mufti’s “minoritarian” critical stance—critiques both rationalist and majoritarian forms of secularism from a minority position. A minoritarian position helps to illuminate the local origin of “universal” categories such as rationalism. Said allows for the claims of secularism in the postcolonial world to be formulated in terms of the *contingent* demands of peace and justice, rather than drawing sustenance from a putatively universal Reason. This does not imply rejecting “reason” *tout court*: being secular today in a postcolonial context means “elaborating the bases of this formulation and the

---

modernity itself. The terms of Nehruvian secularism itself have to be turned against it with the demand that it ‘secularize’ itself.” Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 117.

<sup>85</sup> Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 119.

contours of this contingency, rather than succumbing to an undialectical rejection of Enlightenment as (colonial) domination.”<sup>87</sup> Since culture in modern times has taken over the moral purposes of religion in a civil society, then the task of the secular critic is to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies of culture without slipping into a separatist or sectarian mode.

Mufti’s essay proposes a theory of secularism which claims a different genealogy from any form of rationalist transcendence. But he does not provide a sufficiently convincing epistemological framework for coming to a better understanding of the truth-claims of lifeworlds which are radically different, even opposed, to a rationalist secular vision, without subsuming them into this vision, or slipping into a freewheeling cultural relativism. How can one allow for the validity of religious belief in the modern age without either reducing it to sentiment and affect or accepting it simply by virtue of its cultural difference, thus implicitly not engaging with it?

In the face of the global problems confronting the human community in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century [or the early 21<sup>st</sup> century], the possibility of a universal community of communication cannot be discarded in favor of a relativist agonistics.<sup>88</sup>

Elaborating a properly responsible form of secularism must take the necessity of a “universal community” into account as well.

### 1.5. Translation and Conversion

---

<sup>86</sup> Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 121.

<sup>87</sup> Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 121.



Possible modes of communication between different worldviews are “conversion”, “translation”, and dialogism. The novel genre articulates these modes in such a way as to perform the function of bridging gaps between worldviews, while simultaneously representing their radical discontinuity. First we shall examine what the concepts of conversion and translation consist of, and hopefully illuminate what I think are crucial points of contact between them. Then we shall discuss the implications of novelistic dialogism for the representation of radically conflicting worldviews and its status as a “mode of communicative action” in *Midnight’s Children* and *A Suitable Boy*.

Conversion, for David Krieger, is a key notion for the possibility of global thinking in a radically pluralistic world and a postmodern context.<sup>89</sup> This is a *methodological* conversion, as opposed to the exclusive and apologetic *confessional* conversion. What a methodological conversion can achieve as an epistemological concept, is that it can be used in two ways at once. On the one hand, it can do justice to the radical discontinuity of knowledge. On the other hand, a methodological conversion model allows us to conceive the continuity of knowledge in such a way as to open a space for an “unlimited community of communication” which is not imperialist. Conversion allows a transition between worldviews, while fully acknowledging the radical discontinuities between them, and it emerges as the only credible form of universalism:

If unlimited communication, the universality of knowledge and a more than merely local validity of norms are still possible, they can no longer be grounded in one unified, systematic worldview or religion—which in the present global situation could only mean absolutizing one perspective

---

<sup>88</sup> Krieger, “Conversion”, 231.

<sup>89</sup> Krieger, “Conversion”, 223.

among others—but rather in the ability to move among worldviews. The process of transition between worlds emerges in postmodernity as the only credible form of universalism.<sup>90</sup>

Ideology and faith are replaced with a notion of “cultural metanarratives”:

if ideology and faith as polarized terms are replaced by a notion of “cultural metanarratives” at work in nonmonolithic, pluralistic societies, it would be easier to conceptualize—and revitalize—possibilities for the attainment of a pragmatics of discourse where the *meaning* rather than validity of truth claims is foregrounded.<sup>91</sup>

Conversion is a conceptual means by which the gaps between different cultural metanarratives might be bridged. Given the lack of a metalanguage which can negotiate between conflicting paradigms espoused by different faiths:

The only possible form of negotiation is one that entails a transition, or a *conversion*, from one paradigm to another. Indeed, the process of transition between world-views emerges, in contexts of pluralism, as the only credible form of negotiation. If discourse beyond the level of argumentation is to materialize, it cannot be grounded in a unitary worldview or religion but rather in the ability to move *between* worldviews.<sup>92</sup>

Thus methodological conversion emerges as an “intersubjective, transitional, and transactional mode of negotiation between two otherwise irreconcilable world-views.”<sup>93</sup>

Like conversion, translation is a way of negotiating between conflicting religious/secular paradigms (however Chakrabarty also points out its negative application in the subordination of religious and mythical idioms to scientific

---

<sup>90</sup> Krieger, “Conversion”, 231.

<sup>91</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 174.

<sup>92</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 175.

rationalism.) The concept of transcendent secularism can be conceived as a metalanguage, which translates between different languages and the “higher” language of science itself. In Chakrabarty’s example, *pani* in Hindi and “water” in English can both be mediated by H<sub>2</sub>O. However, translation from various languages into a positivist superior idiom encounters grave difficulties when confronted with translations between divergent religious paradigms:

So it could be said that although the sciences signify some kind of sameness in our understanding of the world across cultures, the gods signify differences [...] Writing about the presence of gods and spirits in the secular language of history or sociology would therefore be like translating into a universal language that which belongs to a field of differences.<sup>94</sup>

The impossibility of effecting a complete translation of different worldviews into the metalanguage of reason does not mean embracing cultural relativism. To think in terms of singularities is *not* to make a claim against the permeability of cultures and languages:

It is, in fact, to appeal to models of cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term for granted. The Hindi *pani* may be translated into the English “water” without having to go through the superior positivity of H<sub>2</sub>O.<sup>95</sup>

The point about translation between lifeworlds is that it is to be conceived as a *barter*, rather than an exchange of commodities; so that when poets translate between Hindu and Muslim gods using the expression “supreme God”, this does not function as a scientific third term:

---

<sup>93</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 176.

<sup>94</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 76.

These instances of translation do not necessarily suggest peace and harmony between Hindus and Muslims, but they are translations in which codes are switched locally, without going through a universal set of rules. There are no overarching censoring/limiting/defining systems of thought that neutralize and relegate differences to the margins, nothing like an overarching category of “religion” that is supposed to remain unaffected by differences between the entities it seeks to name and thereby contain. The very obscurity of the translation process allows the incorporation of that which remains untranslatable.<sup>96</sup>

Translation as a negotiation between worldviews functions as a barter, as a one-for-one exchange, which must be negotiated every time. There is no easy shortcut. The rules governing translation from one religious paradigm to another (or from one religious language to another) cannot acquire the “universality” of scientific discourse. Translation resembles conversion as a mode of negotiation between lifeworlds, because it does not definitively renounce the possibility of a global thinking, and yet does not rely on an overarching universal reason to effect this bridge between “cultural metanarratives” such as rationalist secularism and religious belief.

Conversion and translation as modes of negotiation are essential characteristics of a radical secularism. Radical secularism is characterized by a skepticism about universalizing systems of knowledge, be they religious or secular/cultural. However, in order for radical secularism to be a productive critical method, it must also be politically responsible and accept that universal communication is an ethical imperative in a world where international cooperation is an increasingly necessary condition. It must be optimistic about bridging the gaps between religious lifeworlds and rationalist secularism,

---

<sup>95</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 83.

between the rationalist language of social science and that of religious belief. Translation between idioms is possible, but only through step-by-step negotiation, and accepting occasional obscurity as a necessary price for communication.

### 1.6. Dialogism and the novel form

Both translation and conversion are premised on the idea of dialogue, a defining characteristic of the novel form according to Mikhail Bakhtin. Fiction may offer the possibility of a “universal communication” without its necessary subordination to rationalist discourse. The dialogic form of the novel stands out as a genre eminently suited for the representation of a radical pluralism of worldviews:

The novel is an anti-authoritarian, democratizing art form which represents the multiplicity of conflict around representation in the life which it re-enacts, resisting all totalizing narratives or theories while itself being driven towards totalization by its ability to absorb and re-stage the heteroglossia of society as a whole.<sup>97</sup>

*Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* are able to articulate this pluralism with regard to the articulation of secular and religious identity in the Indian context, albeit in different ways. But they might also be taken to reveal both the potentialities and the limits of novelistic dialogism as a problematic critical category. Both of the novels, as narratives of the nation in English, foreground

---

<sup>96</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 86.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Young, *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 56.

the conflict between secular and religious identity and endorse a broadly pluralist perspective of the Indian nation-state. However *Midnight's Children* goes further in its staging of dialogism; the conflict between religious and secular identity of the nation is not resolved within its pages. *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, appears to be premised on a subordination of religious belief to reason in its treatment of politics and its separate strands of "political" and "domestic" narrative. Though its portrayal of Legislative Assembly debates provides a window as to the workings of democracy, where conflicting political and religious views are aired, the third-person omniscient narrator implicitly endorses a rationalist secularist perspective on events and ideological debates which largely coincides with Nehru's position. However, the novel form concedes a certain amount of flexibility to Seth's articulation of religious belief and its importance in Indian society by allowing the staging and intertwining of public and private narrative. Many of the characters move frequently within the two spheres; indeed an apparently "private" character such as Maan Kapoor, whom we initially get to know through his passionate love affair with the courtesan Saeeda Bai, then becomes involved in his father's political campaigning and eventually his actions play a determining role in the result of the Brahmpur elections.

But if compared to *Midnight's Children's* radical secularism, whose narrator is "caught between belief and disbelief", and the often violent staging of conflicting voices and narratives in his story, then the ordered narration of *A Suitable Boy* appears much more monologic than the polyphonic structure of Saleem Sinai's voice. Here it is useful to turn to Bakhtin in order to establish why exactly the novel is the form best suited for staging a radical pluralism of

worldviews. Bakhtin's notion of language is conceptualized in terms of heteroglossia, or *raznorec'ie* in Russian:

the social diversity of speech types; the internal stratification present in every language at every given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite of the novel as a genre.<sup>98</sup>

Bakhtin's theory of the essential dialogicity of language finds its ultimate artistic expression in the novel:

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation) is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-edged discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who's speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions [...] Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized.<sup>99</sup>

For Bakhtin, a unique example of the possibilities for the novel's dialogism is Dostoevsky's fiction. Instead of the authorial position dominating the novel and the speeches of the characters, the speech and ideologies of the different characters compete without ever being concluded or resolved:

In the first place in his characters' language there is a profound and unresolved conflict with another's word on the level of lived experience ("another's word about me"), on the level of ethical life (another's judgement, recognition or nonrecognition by another) and finally on the level of ideology (the world views of characters understood as unresolved and unresolvable dialogue).<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 263.

<sup>99</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 324.

The dialogic nature of the novel form, for Bakhtin, confers on it a unique heuristic value which is not shared by the monological nature of traditional poetic forms.<sup>101</sup> However, within the general dialogism assigned to the novel, Bakhtin in his work on Dostoevsky distinguished between monologic and polyphonic novels, the first type being represented by Tolstoy's novels and the second by Dostoevsky's.<sup>102</sup> For Bakhtin, the polyphonic novel enables the staging of contrasting and irreconcilable world views without falling into the trap of cultural relativism:

[...] the polyphonic approach has nothing in common with relativism (or with dogmatism). But it should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism). Polyphony as an *artistic* method lies on an entirely different plane.<sup>103</sup>

Though dialogism may offer a bridge between contrasting worldviews, it also raises serious conceptual problems. If taken to its logical conclusions, it seems to postulate the complete dissolution of the boundaries between the self and the other. Robert Young observes that dialogism runs the risk of turning into an ultimately meaningless critical category:

---

<sup>100</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 349.

<sup>101</sup> Bakhtin's theory of language presents the stratified and centrifugal nature of dialogized heteroglossia in a constant battle against the verbal-ideological tendency towards unification of the literary language. Bakhtin pits the monologic voice of the poet, who represents this verbal-ideological tendency towards unification of the literary language, against the language of the novelist, who does not destroy the seeds of social heteroglossia embedded in his words. See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 299.

<sup>102</sup> Bakhtin's position on dialogism is not always easy to extrapolate. In *The Dialogic Imagination* he lays out his theory of the novel in the essay "Discourse in the Novel", where he seems to suggest that dialogism is applicable to all types of novels. In his other work, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, however, he appears to complicate the notion of the novel as a dialogic form by distinguishing between monologic and polyphonic novels.



Dialogism's ubiquity is such that, as Todorov points out, logically it becomes impossible to distinguish between monologic and dialogic discourse, since all discourse is by definition dialogic, that is, maintains extra-textual relations. In the last analysis, dialogism breaks down all same/other oppositions even while it is itself predicated on them.<sup>104</sup>

To the extent to which *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* stage different versions of the religious/secular conflict in the Indian context, the two novels are characterized by greater or lesser degrees of polyphony. In *Midnight's Children*, religious and rationalist voices vie for dominance, without either of the two being resolved in the other. Saleem's gift for telepathy enables him to enter minds, and he enters the mind of Nehru, who is busily hatching economic plans for India while surrounded by astrologers:

I became Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister and author of framed letters: I sat with the great man amongst a bunch of gaptoothed, straggle-bearded astrologers and adjusted the Five Year Plan to bring it into harmonic alignment with the music of the spheres... (MC 174)

In *A Suitable Boy* national identity is divided into public and private dimensions. The message is clear: in the public sphere, religion is not allowed to enter. Indeed politics, economics, and statecraft are supposed to be, ideally, the domain of rationality; and the valorization of religious belief and outright traditionalism is almost entirely consigned to the private or domestic narrative of the novel. A riot that takes place in the old part of Brahmpur, for example, is seen as an aberration, as place *outside* of what constitutes the nation; religious feelings have been allowed to enter the public sphere and disrupt it. The

---

<sup>103</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 69.

<sup>104</sup> Young, *Torn Halves*, 48. I shall develop this point further in the Conclusions.

omniscient narrator almost constantly identifies and indeed sympathizes with the police officer in charge of subduing the riot; with the forces of law and order, and ultimately of “reason”. The staging of religious versus secular perspectives in *A Suitable Boy* appears more monologic than in *Midnight's Children*, since in Seth's statist portrayal of India, religious views in the public sphere are portrayed as inherently dangerous and unreasonable. The link between the monologic novel and Enlightenment reason is one possible genealogy of the novel traced by Bakhtin, which he juxtaposed to the polyphonic and non-teleologic structure of Dostoevsky's work:

Even when one is dealing with a collective, with a multiplicity of creating forces, unity is nevertheless illustrated through the image of a single consciousness: the spirit of a nation, the spirit of a people, the spirit of history and so forth [....] The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres and ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism, with its cult of a unified and exclusive reason, and especially the Enlightenment, during which time the basic generic forms of European artistic prose took shape [....] This faith in the self-sufficiency of a single consciousness in all spheres of ideological life is not a theory created by some specific thinker; no, it is a profound structural characteristic of the creative ideological activity of modern times, determining all its external and internal forms.<sup>105</sup>

So far I have delineated some of the major theoretical concepts that underlie contemporary discussions of secularism in the contemporary South Asian and postcolonial context. I link the need and the possibility of questioning and “de-sacralizing” the rationalist premises of Nehruvian secularism, to the two novels under discussion and the ways in which they use dialogism to present narrative voices at varying critical distance from it. It is my contention that both critical stances must be read in conjunction with one another in order to offer a

comprehensive understanding of “narratives of the social imaginary of the nation-people” in the Indian context.<sup>106</sup> This alternation between a critique and an endorsement of rationalism could be seen as forming part of the political responses of the two novelists to specific events happening at that time. For example, Seth’s endorsement of a secularism based on rationalist premises appears as an understandable response to the “communalization” of politics in the 90s, an apparent surrender of the public sphere to sectarian tendencies. In the next chapter, I offer a close reading of the narrative voice in the two novels, in order to explore the majoritarian premises of Seth’s novel in relationship to minority identity, and to flesh out how Rushdie constructs a more “radical” secular position by adopting a minoritarian stance for his narrator Saleem Sinai.

---

<sup>105</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 82.

<sup>106</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 152.

## Chapter Two

### Minority Identity in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

The previous chapter articulated the two categories of rational and radical secularism that take on more specific and concrete configurations in the novels under discussion. This chapter attempts to map these two alternative versions of secularism onto the novels in order to explore how each novel deals with the question of minority identity in its representation of the nation. Because of the different structuring of the narrative voice in the two novels—the Hindu third-person omniscient narrator of *A Suitable Boy* as opposed to the Muslim first-person narrator of *Midnight's Children*—the relationship between minorities and the state is configured in radically different ways in the two novels. We see how the development of rationalist secularism in *A Suitable Boy* assumes the contours of “myth”, in the sense that Roland Barthes understood the term.<sup>1</sup> Narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse serve to cement the alliance between narrator and characters in *A Suitable Boy* such as Nehru and the minister Mahesh Kapoor who support a resolutely secular perspective in politics. In *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, the abstract, secular citizen of postcolonial India is deconstructed through the trope of Saleem's migrant family, whose place of origin is Kashmir, a territory long disputed between both India and Pakistan. Saleem's reconstruction of national history is frequently punctuated by ruptures in the secular narrative, such as the episode in which a holy relic is stolen from a mosque in Srinagar, Kashmir, provoking riots among

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973).

the Muslim community. Saleem's version of this episode is contrasted with that of Ghosh's re-telling of it in his novel *The Shadow Lines*. My reading of Ghosh's text aims to highlight the discourse of syncretic secularism he shares with Rushdie, while pointing to the way in which he essentializes (or "mythifies") the South Asian syncretic tradition as an alternative form of nationalism for the subcontinent.

### 2.1. Versions of secularism in Seth and Rushdie

In *A Suitable Boy*, the articulation of a rationalist secularism largely coincides with Nehruvian secular nationalism. It can be called majoritarian, for three reasons: firstly, because it has a rationalist approach to the question of religion in the public sphere, secondly because its third-person omniscient narrator embodies the perspective of a tolerant *Hindu* subject, and, thirdly, because the novel deals with India, and how India's politics towards minorities, especially Muslims, were played out *after* Partition.

In relation to the second point mentioned above, Seth's secularism can be said to coincide with a middle-class (or upper-caste) Hindu point of view. Generally, this identification is implied. Only at one point is there an explicit identification of the narrator with one of the communities represented in the story. Significantly, this identification occurs when Seth gives a pseudo-etymology for the city of Brahmpur. In commenting on Hinduism, the narrator remarks that it is rare for a religious feeling to be entirely transcendent:

Hindus as much as anyone else [...] are eager for terrestrial, not merely post-terrestrial blessings. We want specific results, whether to cure a child for disease or to guarantee his IAS results [...] or to find a suitable match for a daughter" (ASB 1178, emphasis added).

This *we* is inclusive of the narrator.

Seth's secularism does not correspond to an absence of religious feeling, but is rather a non-sectarianism, but within a middle-class Hindu framework. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, while analyzing the "conservative-national" component of Indian narratives of the 50s and 60s, find that this upper-caste Hindu centrality is consolidated and increasingly becomes identified with a national and "secular" identity, tending to marginalize other identities such as lower-castes or different religious groups.<sup>2</sup>

The India of *A Suitable Boy* is the one shaped and defined by Partition, indeed the time period Seth chooses for his story, 1950-1952, is the one most directly influenced by the legacy of Partition and by Nehru. Thus the novel engages with a firmly bounded geo-political territory.

*Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, endorses a radical secularism which takes the form of "minoritarian" secularism: a secular stance articulated from minority positions, close to what Mufti identifies with Said's "secular criticism". In discussing *Midnight's Children*, we can speak of a minoritarian secularism because the first-person narrator, Saleem Sinai is (apparently) a Muslim, though also of Christian and Hindu ancestry. His narrative of India, told from a minoritarian perspective, necessarily transcends post-colonial national borders, and implicates the divided histories of India and Pakistan in each other. In this recuperation of a syncretic history for the different states of

South Asia, *Midnight's Children* is similar to Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*, in its retelling of a communal episode whose resonance stretched across national borders, from Kashmir to Calcutta to Dhaka (then capital of East Pakistan).

It is important to state that despite their differences, the representations of India in the two novels share a common ideological matrix which can be traced back to Nehru's idea of the nation as a multi-cultural imagined community. Both novels recuperate India's syncretic and eclectic traditions in order to represent and rewrite Indian history. Chaudhuri calls *Midnight's Children* a Nehruvian epic, though the time of its publication coincided with beginning of the end of Nehruvian India and of the Nehruvian secular consensus.<sup>3</sup> *A Suitable Boy* could be read as an "epic" novel in that it presents a meticulous mapping of social reality in the style of the realist novel and yet is characterized by a monologic narrative voice, which is a defining characteristic of the epic according to Bakhtin.<sup>4</sup>

This recuperation of syncretic and eclectic elements in India's past can be likened to Nehru's textual and physical voyage of national "discovery" which leads him to celebrate the civilizational diversity and multifariousness of India. Thus both novels develop an idea of Indian cultural distinctiveness premised on notions of an absorptive and syncretic civilization, which formed the basis of the nationalist secular conception of culture.<sup>5</sup> According to Mushirul Hasan, Nehru was one of the few nationalist leaders of his generation to realize that religious

---

<sup>2</sup> Tharu and Lalita, "The Twentieth Century", *Women Writing in India*, 77.

<sup>3</sup> Chaudhuri, "The Construction of the Indian Novel in English", *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>4</sup> See Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel", *The Dialogic Imagination*, 3-40.

solidarities and allegiances did not structure Indian society to the extent that Hinduist and Islamist nationalists wanted to believe:

Nehru's exceptionally eclectic mind grasped this reality. He believed that inter-community conflicts, as and when they occurred, were counterposed to the quiet, commonplace routines in which communities intermingled. Cross-community linkages rather than religious ties influenced the direction in which patronage, authority and economic relations flowed into everyday life.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Kaviraj rightly points out that this vision of a pre-colonial communal harmony was a specifically nationalist reconstruction of the past, and that it painted a very partial picture of inter-community relations:

While it is comforting to believe that Hindu and Islamic society were evolving a 'composite culture' in everyday forms of social exchange, it was probably truer to say that they developed an adjacency which was a peculiar mixture of acceptance and rejection, at least of insulation from the other.<sup>7</sup>

Each novel develops, in its own very different way, informed by different types of politics, the eclectic and syncretic elements of Indian tradition as a counter-balance to notions of religious purity and communalization. *A Suitable Boy* shows how the eclectic and multicultural traditions of India can be channeled in such a way as to create a civilizational support for a viable state ideology, as Nehru did. This can be read as a response to a period in which the Hindu right was aggressively pre-empting Nehruvian secular nationalism as an ideology for conceiving the relationship between the Hindu majority and the other Indian

---

<sup>5</sup> See Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*.

<sup>6</sup> Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (London: Hurst, 1997), 47-48.



minorities. *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, encompasses a larger time frame than Seth's novel, from 1915 to 1977. Its historical scope in some sense tends to recuperate a common past for the Indian subcontinent, both before and after Partition. By focusing on this wider time frame of the development of Indian nationhood and statehood, Rushdie shows how these diverse traditions and the "composite" nature of Nehru's India which Seth celebrates in this novel, were progressively betrayed by India's politicians.

## 2.2. Imagining a polity

At the center of both novels is the question of how to imagine a polity which can adequately encompass the multifarious and differing notions of identity that can be found in India. Seth chooses a statist approach to the question. Throughout the novel we witness an attempt to delineate a common denominator for all Indians in order to define who is an Indian citizen. He outlines the complex layering of communitarian and individual values that led to the formation of modern Indian identity, and which still today make the definition of Indian citizenship a problematic one. Though exploring the tentative status of the Indian citizen, Seth ultimately encompasses all the problematic figures of this Indianness—the chamars, the Muslim landowners, the Muslim courtesan and her entourage—within an ecumenical, inclusive notion of a single nationhood.

Seth's novel touches at heart the problem of how to conceive the rights of citizenship in postcolonial India, whether within a communitarian or an individualist framework. It would seem that the very definition of citizenship

---

<sup>7</sup> Kaviraj, "On the Discourse of Secularism", 195.

implies a relationship between the individual and the state, rather than that between communities and the state. The Indian Constitution, however, gives a definition of citizenship and its concomitant rights which is inconsistent: in some cases, the Constitution can be seen to uphold communitarian rights, and in other cases, individual rights. Before the law, the Indian citizen, according to the community to which s/he belongs, is subject to different civil codes.<sup>8</sup> There is a strong limit in the Indian constitution to the liberal doctrine which cannot recognize the validity of any collective rights of cultural groups.<sup>9</sup>

The inconsistencies between individual and collective rights before the law are most clearly seen with regards to the secular claims of the Indian state. Though the Constitution declares that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, etc., it judges Muslims and Hindus according to different personal laws.<sup>10</sup> *A Suitable Boy* Seth explores the fluid status of Indian citizenship, by foregrounding a series of conflicts between individual and communitarian values which shape the development of the characters. For example, the identity of Lata, the heroine, is largely shaped by the pressure imposed upon her by her mother, Mrs Rupa Mehra, to marry

---

<sup>8</sup> However, the Constitution contains a non-justiciable Directive Principle which declares that the state should endeavor to provide a uniform civil code for all its citizens: "The State shall endeavor to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India." Article 47, *Constitution of India*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Sandria B. Freitag points out how, increasingly, "the initial constitutional emphasis on the relationship between individual and state began to give way before an increasing reliance on the relationship between communities and the state—a reliance than can be discerned both in term of state policies (e.g. reservation policies for scheduled tribes and castes) and in terms of political strategizing (in the wooing of vote blocs)." Sandria B. Freitag, "Contesting in Public: Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Communalism", *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, ed. David Ludden (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 228.

<sup>10</sup> "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them." Article 15(1), *Constitution of India*, 21. However, in 1951 the First Amendment Act was passed, which in reference to Article 15(1) stated that "nothing in this article [...] shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes." Article 15(4), *Constitution of India*, 22.

into her own caste, and her impossible love for the Muslim boy Kabir. Lata's character develops through this conflict between a family-oriented, communitarian mentality, and more individualistic values.<sup>11</sup> The reader is gradually initiated into a system of ethics founded on a distinctly Indian interpretation of the individual vis-à-vis the family, the community, the state, the nation. Another Indian novelist, Amitav Ghosh, has commented on the community-individual conflict which is such an important theme in Indo-Anglian fiction.<sup>12</sup> Seth and Ghosh testify to the difficulty of writing about the Indian "private" self, the narratization of the interiority which is a foundational aspect of the novel, without relating this interiority to the family in the first instance, then to the community, then to the state, and lastly (perhaps problematically) to the nation.

*A Suitable Boy* draws on the tradition of the biography or "social family" novel. In this sort of novel, "the modes for plotting the story link one character to another not as one person to another person but as father to son, husband to wife, rival to rival, lover to beloved [...] property-owner to proletarian", etc. etc.<sup>13</sup> The web of relationships between the four families at the center of the novel effectively connects each character in such a way that no one is "left out", and that the characters' actions and thoughts are all a function of the plot. This

---

<sup>11</sup> The conflict between differing value-systems in the novel, especially with regard to inter-religious unions, shows that even an apparently Westernized genre like the post-colonial Indian novel in English bears evidence of the difficulties faced by the first Indian novelists, writing in a form that requires individualism as a value and writing about a society that denies it. See Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1985; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Of two of his novels, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh says that they are centered on families, because for himself that is a way of "displacing" the nation, and adds that "I am sure that this is the case also with many Indian writers other than myself. In other words, I'd like to suggest that writing about families is one way of *not* writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities)." Correspondence between Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty, [www.amitavghosh.com](http://www.amitavghosh.com), online, November 2002.

mode of novelistic construction has consequences for characterological representation:

The hero is assigned to a plot as someone fully embodied and strictly localized in life, as someone dressed in the concrete and impenetrable garb of his class or social station, his family position, his age, his life and biographical goals. His *humanness* is to such an extent made concrete and specific by his place in life that it is in itself denied any decisive influence on plot relationships. It can be revealed only within the strict framework of those relationships.<sup>14</sup>

Of Lata, the main heroine of the novel, we know that she is 19, she studies English literature at the University of Brahmpur, her mother is looking for a husband for her, all things that contribute to a very well-defined role for her within the plot. Indeed the initial impetus of the plot—and the title of the novel—are given by Mrs Rupa Mehra's search for a suitable boy for her younger daughter.

Seth ultimately provides an encompassing concept of Indianness, which is stretched to include the untouchables, the middle-class intelligentsia, and the Muslims. This Indianness is rendered by Seth in statist terms: only by relinquishing part of their cultural and religious identity can Muslims become Indian citizens. The effects of the Zamindari Abolition Act (a land reform act initiated by Nehru which aimed to abolish feudal land-holdings) on the way of life of the Muslim land-owning elite in the (invented) state of Purva Pradesh are meant to be symbolic of this “necessary” transformation of Muslim identity. The place of Muslims in the imagined community of India—and more generally, the relationship between the minority and the nation—is a central concern of both

---

<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 104.

novels. What follows is an analysis of how these concerns are played out in the two texts.

### 2.3. Muslim Identity in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

The narrator of *Midnight's Children* embraces a minoritarian perspective precisely because he belongs to both Indian "majority" and "minority" cultures. His "adoptive" parents are Muslim, but his real parents are English Christian and Hindu, respectively. He is brought up by a Goan Catholic ayah, and in the course of the novel switches nationalities: first he is Indian, then he becomes Pakistani. Saleem Sinai is thus in a unique position to embrace all mythologies, but at the same time he exhibits a wariness of any fixed belief. The story of his life seems

to continuously put "Hindu" and "Muslim" (and "Indian" and "Pakistani") in question, to make visible the dialectic of majority and minority within which they are produced, which constitutes the larger part of the movement of Indian modernity itself.<sup>15</sup>

Though Saleem himself turns out to be of mixed ancestry, a main narrative strand of the novel is the issue of Muslim nationalism, and of the transformation of Muslims into a minority community after Partition and Independence. Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, is a secular Muslim, and he represents the dilemmas of a specifically Muslim secularism in the nationalist period and beyond. Shortly after his detachment from Islam, Aadam embraces a new

---

<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 117.

nationalist credo, as he says to his young wife, Naseem, who wishes to maintain purdah: “Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman” (MC 34). The entire relationship between Aadam and Naseem revolves around secular versus religious, or nationalist versus traditionalist. Aadam briefly finds his ideal political representative in the figure of Mian Abdullah, who is trying to create a Muslim secular movement to contrast with the separatism of the Muslim League. Aadam Aziz explains his belief in Abdullah thus: “I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into an Indian. I’m still not much of a Muslim, but I’m all for Abdullah. He’s fighting my fight” (MC 40). Aadam’s nationalism is not quite divorced from a Muslim point of view, without wholeheartedly endorsing it. The “optimism disease”, which according to Saleem caught many of India’s Muslims in 1942, held out the promise of a specifically Muslim secular nationalism. But this nascent secular identity for Muslims was then destroyed by Partition and the making of Indian Muslims into a minority, who had to renounce much of their identity in order to become “truly” Indian.

This loss, or transformation of Muslim identity into a more “secular” one, is represented in *A Suitable Boy* as a necessary part in India’s development towards a modern and democratic nation-state. The implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Act in Purva Pradesh becomes an event which shows how minority identity is reabsorbed into the state. According to the novel, it appears that the Act primarily affected the land-holdings, and therefore the entire way of life, of the Muslim elite. Nawabi culture, namely the elite Muslim culture of North India, has one of its (fictional) centers in Brahmipur. This culture is seen as

a declining, disappearing culture, since it is inextricably linked through systems of patronage to the Muslim and Hindu zamindars (the feudal elite), a ruling class doomed to extinction because of the land reform acts being implemented in Purva Pradesh. A strong nostalgia is perceptible in the way Seth portrays Nawabi culture; a melancholy springing from the “necessary” changes a country must undergo on its way to modernization.<sup>16</sup>

Thus majoritarian secularism is melancholy and optimistic at the same time about the future of the nation. Much will have been lost, but feudalism will have been abolished, the authorial voice seems to be saying in Seth’s novel. Much space is given in the novel to the representation of Nawabi culture, the culture of the feudal elite, with its entourage of courtesans, musicians, singers, whose livelihood depended on the Nawabs (the lords). In the novel, this culture, so typical of North India, is strongly represented, and in many points even defended, by women. Begum Abida Khan is the representative for the Muslim party in the Legislative Assembly in Brahmipur, and in the parliamentary debates staged in the novel hers is the “sectarian” Muslim voice, as opposed to the secular Muslim voice of Abdus Salaam, the secretary of the Congress Minister Mahesh Kapoor. Other memorable Muslim women in the novel include the singer and courtesan Saeeda Bai, and Zainab Khan, the daughter of the Nawab Sahib, an aristocratic landowner who is about to lose much of his land through the Zamindari Abolition Act.

---

<sup>16</sup> Mee indicates the link between teleological narratives and nostalgia: “Typically of such histories of progress, along with its sense of the inevitability of a particular kind of national development, comes a nostalgia for a feudal world of Urdu literature and courtly entertainments that is presented as inevitably lost.” Mee, “Not at Home in English?”, 715.

One way in which in the early years of Independence, Muslims were made to feel strongly their status of minorities, was through the occasional confiscation of their property, defined as “evacuee property”, namely property belonging to Muslims who had left India for Pakistan, and therefore reclaimable by the state. This practice is highlighted by episodes in both novels. In *A Suitable Boy*, the episode is as follows. One evening, Zainab, the daughter of the Nawab Sahib of Baitar, is informed by her maidservant that a police constable is waiting outside her ancestral home, Baitar House. He is there to take over the mansion, as he has, *he says*,

“an order from the custodian of Evacuee Property and the Home Minister to take possession of all the parts of the house that are not inhabited, in view of the fact that most of the former residents have now established residence in Pakistan.” (ASB 295)

Zainab, within the confines of purdah, manages to communicate with her father’s private secretary by talking to him through a sheet between the zenana (women’s quarters) and the mardana (men’s quarters). The secretary takes her son and a letter written by her to the Chief Minister of the State, in which Zainab reminds him of a debt of gratitude he owes her father, the Nawab Sahib. The stratagem works; the Chief Minister telephones the Home Minister Agarwal and tells him to call the evacuation off. Baitar House remains in the hands of the Khans; Zainab’s resourcefulness has paid off, even without her breaking out of purdah. And yet the positive ending of the episode is shown to be entirely dependent on the goodwill and gratitude of the Chief Minister Sharma towards the Khans; indeed, much Muslim property and business was expropriated as “evacuee property” in India. Muslims, at best, are precariously protected by the



legal system; their very way of life is in danger, at the hands of a threatening Hindu political majority.

A major point on which the two novels differ is whether state secularism failed or succeeded in protecting minorities. In *A Suitable Boy*, what happens to Zainab is seen as a dramatic, but minor incident; a regrettable instance of someone high up attempting to take advantage of the laws on evacuee property in order to lash out against a rival. But in *Midnight's Children*, appropriation of Muslim funds by the so-called secular government is foregrounded as an important moment of rupture in the secular nationalist narrative of the new nation-state, as we see in the following episode of the novel. This can be ascribed to the different narrative voices of the novels: a Hindu majoritarian perspective versus a Muslim minoritarian one.

One day, Ahmed Sinai, Saleem's father, discovers that all his assets have been frozen, by order of the government. His friend Dr Narlikar explains it thus:

"I blame myself entirely; we made ourselves too public. These are bad times, Sinai bhai—freeze a Muslim's assets, they say, and you make him run to Pakistan, leaving all his wealth behind him. Catch the lizard's tail and he'll snap it off! This so-called secular state gets some damn clever ideas." (MC 135)

Saleem's parodic and allegorical take on reality literalizes the freezing of his father's assets into a physical fact, that his father's testicles have become ice-cold. State secularism cannot prevent religion and religious discrimination from re-entering India through the back door:

Escaped cobras vanished into the sewers of the city; banded kraits were seen on buses. Religious leaders described the snake escape as a

warning—the god Naga had been unleashed, they intoned, as a punishment for the nation’s official renunciation of its deities. (“We are a secular state,” Nehru announced and Morarji and Patel and Menon all agreed: but still Ahmed Sinai shivered under the influence of the freeze). (MC 137)

Seth’s narrative of the Nehru years, on the other hand, highlights Nehru’s active assumption of the role of protector of minorities, and the relative success at implementing a state secularism which ultimately managed to defend the rights of Muslims against the more conservative Hindu wing of Congress. What emerges from Seth’s narrative is the idea that only state secularism can protect minorities; and no alternative solution to the minority issue is envisaged.

The political narrative of *A Suitable Boy* is largely focalized through the eyes of Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue for the state of Purva Pradesh. He is both literally and metaphorically, the representative of the Nehruvite Congress position within the Legislative Assembly. His major political rival is L.N. Agarwal, the conservative Congress Home Minister of Purva Pradesh:

In sharp contrast to L.N. Agarwal, Mahesh Kapoor, though a Hindu, was well-known for his tolerance towards other religions—his wife would have said that the only religion he was intolerant towards was his own—and was liked and respected among knowledgeable Muslims [...]  
Rasheed now said to Maan:

“If it were not for people like Nehru at the national level, or your father at the state level, the situation of the Muslims would be even worse than it is.” (ASB 672)

In *A Suitable Boy*, Nehru is portrayed as the most staunch protector of Indian Muslims. Seth takes the view that in the aftermath of the religiously motivated mass killings of Partition, Nehru chose the only political route which would

guarantee a modicum of communal harmony in India: the active endorsement of a state secularism.

Seth painstakingly retraces, in a thinly veiled historical account, the intricate infighting that took place in the Congress Party of the early 1950s between the Hindu right-wing, headed by Vallabhbhai Patel and Purushottamdas Tandon, and the left-wing, secular Nehruvites: “Apart from economic differences, the Nehruites and the Tandonites saw the Muslim question in an entirely different light” (ASB 1036). Seth foregrounds all the divisive elements that were threatening to rip the Congress Party in two and compromise Nehru’s leadership, and together with it, any guarantees for Muslim citizens in the newly created Indian state. For the Hindu hardliners of the Congress,

so successfully indeed had the two-nation theory—the Muslim League’s justification for Partition—taken root in their own minds that they saw Muslim citizens of India as Muslims first and Indians only incidentally; and were willing to visit on their heads punishment for the actions of their co-religionists in the other country.

Such talk repelled Nehru. The thought of India as a Hindu state with its minorities treated as second-class citizens, sickened him (ASB 1037).

Seth then lists a series of measures that Nehru took on himself personally to ensure that Muslims would not be treated as second class citizens, such as accepting erstwhile leaders of the Muslim League into the Congress, trying to convince Muslims not to leave India for Pakistan, and trying “to soften some of the more draconian decisions of the Custodian-General of Evacuee Property, who had often acted more in the interests of those who hankered after evacuee

property than the of the evacuees themselves" (ASB 1037).<sup>17</sup> Seth notes how Nehru "had preached against communal enmity in every speech he had given—and Nehru was much given to speeches" (ASB 1037). Seth presents the actions that Nehru undertook in this period as improvised attempts to maintain unity in a country that, in the early 50s and so soon after Partition, was at real risk of a civil war. Retaliation against Muslims for the horrors of Partition was very much in the air:

All these actions infuriated people who saw Nehru as a rootless, deracinated Indian, whose sentimental creed was a pro-Muslim secularism, and who was divorced from the majority of his own Hindu citizenry.

The only problem for his critics was that his citizenry loved him and would almost certainly vote for him, as it had done ever since his great tour in the 1930s, when had travelled around the country, charming and stirring up vast audiences (ASB 1037).

Nehru's pluralist conception of citizenship shaped the Constitution, at a time in which multiculturalism was not a term in current political usage. There were few models which "could be used to help focus India's assorted diversities into a political structure founded on a democratic principle. This had to be invented through practice."<sup>18</sup> Seth's depiction of Nehru subscribes to this improvisational view of politics in terms of citizenship and religion. Khilnani rightly remarks that current interpretations of Nehruvian secularism "impart a misleading ideological fixity to what was always much more an active precept of political prudence."<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Evidence of Nehru's concern with the definition of "evacuee property" is to be found in the letters he wrote fortnightly to his Chief Ministers. See Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers 1947-1964*, vol. 2, ed. G. Parthasarathi (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Government Fund, 1986), 577.

<sup>18</sup> Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 172.

<sup>19</sup> Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 176.

## 2.4. Secularism and Muslim culture in *A Suitable Boy* and *The Discovery of India*

There are many parallels between Nehruvian secularism as it is represented in *A Suitable Boy* and in Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, a nationalist version of Indian history and of the independence movement published in 1946, a year before Independence. However, these two texts leave no alternative for a secularism articulated from minority positions. There is no real space, either in Seth's or in Nehru's text, for a specifically Muslim secularism, of which Aadam Aziz is a representative figure in *Midnight's Children*. Mufti finds evidence in Nehru's *The Discovery of India* that secular nationalism, as articulated by him and other nationalists, denied a representative space to Muslim modernism.<sup>20</sup> Nehru, writing in 1946, finds that

since British rule came to India, Moslems have produced few individuals of the modern type. They have produced some remarkable men but, as a rule, these represented the continuity of the old culture and tradition and did not easily fit in with modern developments.<sup>21</sup>

For Nehru, the inability of the Muslim elite to modernize itself is not due to any innate failing:

It derived from certain historical causes, from the delay in the development of a new industrial middle class, and the excessively feudal

---

<sup>20</sup> Mufti, "Secularism and Minority: Elements of a Critique", *Social Text* 45 (1995), 75-96.

<sup>21</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 413.

background of the Moslems, which blocked up avenues of development and prevented the release of talent.<sup>22</sup>

Both in Nehru and in Seth, the irreducible heterogeneity of the minor and the major cultures is ascribed to a historical cause, and even more specifically to the Muslim elites' "feudal background". In *A Suitable Boy* the Nawab Sahib represents a glorious, yet retrograde culture, destined by history to disappear with the end of the zamindari system. The Muslims, from vital representatives of North Indian culture, have been reduced to the status of a minority, as is exemplified by the transformation of Baitar House, the Khans' ancestral home, before and after Partition:

Owing to the constant bustle, the visiting, the festivals, the celebrations, in both the men's and the women's quarters it had had a grand atmosphere of energy and life.

With Partition things had changed. The house was no longer the great community it had been. It had become, in many ways, lonely. Uncles and cousins had dispersed to Karachi or Lahore. Of the three brothers, one had died, one had gone away, and only that gentle widower, the Nawab Sahib, remained. (ASB 284-285)<sup>23</sup>

In the Legislative Assembly of Purva Pradesh, the politician Abida Khan strenuously defends the zamindari system against the land reforms being pushed by the ruling Congress Party. Her speeches express a wish to prevent Muslim culture from becoming a minority culture:

---

<sup>22</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 413.

<sup>23</sup> The ending of Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961; repr. New Delhi, 1994) provides an interesting point in common with *A Suitable Boy* in its portrayal of the Muslim elite after Partition. Hosain's novel evokes the intense currents of political and social change that swept through the Muslim elite in the 1930s. The vibrant and modernizing character of the Indian Muslim elite seems to vanish entirely after 1947, and the novel has a strange, almost

"[...] the fact is that it is we zamindars who have made this province what it is—who made it strong, who gave it its special flavour. In every field of life we have made our contribution, a contribution that will long outlive us, and that you cannot wipe away. The universities, the colleges, the traditions of classical music, the schools, the very culture of this place were established by us." (ASB 307)

Muslims, in order to become Indian citizens "fully", had to forgo a vital part of what constituted their past, their culture, in short their identity. In other words, as Mufti notes, a Muslim could not be "a Muslim outright" if he was to be conceived of as a modern Indian:

[...] secular nationalism presents a specifically Muslim modernism with the following choice: it can either dissolve itself within that nationalist mainstream, and simultaneously give up any claim to being "representative", or be by definition (and perversely) communalist, retrograde, and effectively in collusion with the feudalizing policies of imperialism; in either case, it must cease being "true" to itself.<sup>24</sup>

Mufti interprets Jinnah's two-nation theory as a way for Muslims of not becoming a minority:

how to remain politically united (as Indians) without becoming unequal (as Hindus and Muslims). From the perspective of secular nationalism, therefore, the partition of India embodies a structure of feeling built around a gesture of "letting go": maybe now we can narrate India's modernity as the emergence of a secular culture and polity. Partition must be read not as the logical culmination of the separatist impulse, but as a necessary development for the discourse of nationhood itself, a turning of two-thirds of the Muslims of India into non-Indians in order for the remaining one-third to be successfully cast in the role of national minority.<sup>25</sup>

---

spectral ending; only the past remains alive, and the post-Partition (Indian) present from which the narrator is telling her story comes across as ghostly and unreal.

<sup>24</sup> Mufti, "Secularism and Minority", 84.

<sup>25</sup> Mufti, "Secularism and Minority", 86.

The only reason why Muslims are now a minority in India is because of the creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan in 1947. But precisely because they have now been transformed into a minority, their previous religious and cultural identity must be subsumed into that of the secular Indian citizen, represented by Seth as a politically necessary step for India's coming into modernity.

## 2.5. Muslim nationalism in *Midnight's Children*

*Midnight's Children* provides an interesting historical account of Muslims *prior* to their being transformed into a minority. It provides a counter-narrative to the resolutely majoritarian secular perspective of *A Suitable Boy*, where the Muslim issue appears only in post-Partition terms. Mufti remarks that Muslim nationalists didn't have much of a choice; they either had to join the nationalist mainstream represented by Congress, or they had to risk being branded communalist and "retrograde", like those who joined the Muslim League. Saleem recounts how his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, who was a Muslim, though "not much" of one, was wary of the Muslim League. So was Mian Abdullah, who attempted to begin a Muslim secular movement called the Free Islam Convocation.<sup>26</sup> The friend and patron of this movement, the Rani of Cooch

---

<sup>26</sup> "Mian Abdullah, the Hummingbird, had created the Free Islam Convocation almost single-handedly. He invited the leaders of the dozens of Muslim splinter groups to form a loosely confederated alternative to the dogmatism and vested interests of the Leaguers. It has been a great conjuring trick, because they had all come. That was the first Convocation, in Lahore; Agra would see the second. The marquees would be filled with members of agrarian movements, urban labourers' syndicates, religious divines and regional groupings. It would see confirmed what the first assembly has intimated: that the League, with its demand for a partitioned India, spoke on nobody's behalf but its own. 'They have turned their backs on us,' said the Convocations' posters, 'and now they claim we're standing behind them!' Mian Abdullah opposed the partition" (MC 46).



Naheen, is highly contemptuous of the Muslim League, which she identifies with the feudal imperialists:

("That bunch of toadies!" the Rani cried in her silvery voice, swooping around the octaves like a skier. "Landowners with vested interests to protect! What do they have to do with Muslims? They go like toads to the British and form governments for them, now that the Congress refuses to do it!" It was the year of the "Quit India" resolution. "And what's more," the Rani said with finality, "they are mad. Otherwise why would they want to partition India?") (MC 46)

Mian Abdullah ends up being murdered by Islamist fanatics with "crescent knives". The historical model for Mian Abdullah may well have been Sheikh Abdullah, who was Kashmiri and promoted the ideals of a secular India from a Muslim perspective. The story of Mian Abdullah and the Free Islam Convocation tells of a secular Muslim nationalism which was sympathetic to, but not entirely represented, by, the mainstream nationalism of the Congress. This is why Aadam Aziz claims that Mian Abdullah (and not for example, Nehru or Gandhi) is fighting his fight. The inclusive nationalism of the Congress party, which emphasized the composite character of Indian society, was soon legitimized, especially after Partition, as the sole possible outcome of a secular political agenda for India. Secular nationalists, including those who happened to be Muslim, were expected to identify with Congress as their representative party. The Muslim nationalist was seen as a figure whose religion was always foregrounded, in contrast with that of the secular (Hindu) nationalist, who was

a nationalist “first and foremost”. Thus the term “communalism” came to connote anything that did not conform to the inclusionary idiom of Congress.<sup>27</sup>

However, *Midnight's Children* and Rushdie's next novel, *Shame*, clearly aim to show that the secular and multicultural premises of the Indian nation-state, however majoritarian they may be, are politically more far-seeing and vastly more democratic than the religious authoritarianism of Pakistan, even if one is the member of a minority. Proof of this is that the secular Sinais prefer, initially, to cast in their lot with the new secular India rather than go to Pakistan, though they eventually bow to family and community pressure and emigrate. The peregrinations of the Sinais thus reveal the multiple articulations of difference that internally mark the outward image of a homogenized Muslim cultural nationalism. To some extent, however, Saleem shows a sympathy and an identification with the Congress secular nationalist project which constituted the Indian nation-state, and strongly critiques the sectarian agenda of the Muslim League, the only political party which afforded Muslims an alternative from the Congress. But non-sectarianism, for Saleem, does not mean anti-religiosity, indeed he is always at pains to stress how his own birth, and that of

---

<sup>27</sup> The historian Ayesha Jalal remarks that this inclusionary idiom “is expressed in an artificial binary opposition between secular nationalism and religious communalism. To be secular and nationalist for a Muslim entails publicly disclaiming too close an association with the specific traits of the minority community, religious and cultural. Otherwise there is no escaping the pejorative label of ‘communalism’.” Jalal says that it is time to forsake the dichotomies of “secular” and “religious” as well as “nationalism” and “communalism”. Both Indian and Pakistani nationalism have majoritarian premises, which she links back to the colonial project of religious enumeration. And both states promote a type of inclusionary idiom: “While Indian nationalism asserts its inclusionary idioms in the secular garb and Pakistani nationalism in an inclusionary religious mode, neither avoids the pernicious process of exclusion resulting from the implicit denial of difference. It is the singular and homogenizing agendas of both nation-states which have wittingly or unwittingly created the space for religious bigots seeking political power to target vulnerable minorities.” Ayesha Jalal, “Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia”, *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in South Asia*, ed. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100-102.

the Indian nation-state, is imagined in both secular *and* religious/mythical terms at the same time—the “strange middle ground” of his grandfather’s agnosticism.

*Midnight’s Children* shares *A Suitable Boy*’s endorsement of Nehruvianism, but without Seth’s statist approach. Saleem’s story tells how Nehru’s ecumenical and tolerant secularism was progressively narrowed down to the increasingly monolithic national ethos of Indira Gandhi’s reign, whose electoral slogans proclaimed that “India is Indira” and “Indira is India”. The difference between Rushdie’s approach to secularism and that of Seth’s (and Nehru’s), is that while *Midnight’s Children* sees syncretism and eclecticism as irreducible components of Indian identity, with its concomitant risks (and euphoria) of centrifugal tendencies and dissolution of national boundaries, Nehru wants to see this syncretism transcended and sublated into a modern, rationalist secularism.<sup>28</sup> In *Midnight’s Children* we witness the secularization of an eclectic and polytheistic tradition, which preserves its syncretism within a non-religious framework. In *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, the monological narrative voice is underscored by a rationalist secularism. Indeed rationalist secularism acquires the status of a mythical discourse underpinning the representation of Indian history in *A Suitable Boy*, while its de-mythification underpins the ironic allegory of historical fiction we find in *Midnight’s Children*.

## 2.6. Mythologies of secularism

Seth, by presenting a synchronic view of the secular state in its “ideal” form, namely the early 1950s under Nehru, who was its prime architect, mythifies it by freezing it in time. In Seth’s hands, as we shall see, everything in India’s history has been leading up to this moment, and the major historical events which happen in the novel are working towards the perfecting of the secular, democratic, progressive nation-state, including the relegation of religion and religious imaginings of the nation to the private sphere. Rushdie, on the other hand, by placing secularism within a diachronic, allegorical unfolding of the nation’s history (remembering that allegory is here used to trope what is irreducibly temporal), historicizes secular nationalism and effectively reveals it as myth. Both Rushdie and Seth explicitly characterize nationalism as a sort of mythopoesis. In *Midnight’s Children*, one witnesses Saleem’s constant drive to expose all myth and beliefs as fictive processes, which does not do away with their meaningfulness (though meaning is constantly put into question): “‘What’s real and what’s true aren’t necessarily the same’”, says a character in the novel (MC 79). The de-mystification present in *Midnight’s Children* resembles Roland Barthes’s “revolutionary language”. Unlike myth, which tends to preserve the image of reality, revolutionary language is transformative in the sense that it is involved in “making” the world: “It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> I am extrapolating from the contrast Mufti makes between Ashis Nandy’s recuperation of religious tolerance and Nehru’s thought; however there is no implication here that Nandy’s position can be equated with that of Rushdie’s. See Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 115.

<sup>29</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 159.

There is a community in *Midnight's Children* which seems to possess a consciousness of the de-politicizing tendency of myth; they are the magicians living in the Muslim ghetto in the shadow of the Friday mosque in Delhi, where Saleem takes shelter after being driven from his uncle's house. He finds an old friend there, Picture Singh. From him,

Saleem Sinai learned that Picture Singh and the magicians were people whose hold on reality was absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was. (MC 399)

The magicians' manipulation of language recalls revolutionary speech in so far they seek to transform the world through language without eliding the radical discrepancy between language and reality. Elisions and erasures of this type constitute the basis of mythical language, which "is initially political and finally natural".

*A Suitable Boy* articulates a form of mythical language, which is that of rationalist or transcendent secularism. Barthes defines myth as de-politicized speech. He illustrates this with the image of a black soldier saluting the French flag. This image is meant to symbolize the universality of French patriotism, as an example of the mythical discourse of French colonialism. In the case of the black soldier, for instance, the man is emptied of his own history and identity as an African, and is used as an empty signifier for the French imperial venture. In turn, French imperialism is divested of the contingent, historical, and *fabricated* quality of colonialism:

If I *state the fact* of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying*; I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, in *A Suitable Boy*, secularism as a national discourse is imbued with mythical qualities because it has assumed the role of *the* ideological framework according to which the Indian state and society are to develop. Instead of considering secularism as one discourse among others, secularism operates as a meta-discourse into which other beliefs and imaginings of the nation are subsumed, especially religious ones, somewhat in the way Barthes describes the evolution of bourgeois ideology:

And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name "bourgeois", myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in it, things lose the memory that they once were made.<sup>31</sup>

One way in which the rationalist secular discourse becomes mythified in Seth is through the subtle use of free indirect speech. This is most evident in the political debates. The novel describes at length the ways in which communal issues are aired and resolved in the democratic space of the State Legislative Assembly. The Assembly is a key site in understanding how the novel constructs Indian identity; here, in the parliament, is where the nation is being built. The various voices making up the novel's religious, political, and

---

<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 142.

linguistic heteroglossia are given a representative space within its democratic confines. Indeed the purpose of the parliamentary debates between Agarwal (right-wing Congress member), Abida Khan (representative of the zamindars and of “sectarian” Muslims more generally), the Socialist MLA, and the Mahesh Kapoor (left-wing, Nehruvite Congress member), seems to be that of showing exactly how the democratic process transcend the more strident communal elements in each of these voices. In such a way the potentially centrifugal, heteroglot political tendencies of the newborn nation are shown to be contained within a more orderly and monological democratic space.

According to Bakhtin, the language of the novel is deployed to degrees of greater or lesser proximity to the author and his intentions. Certain aspects of language directly and unmediatedly *express* these intentions, others *refract* those intentions, namely the narrator does not meld completely with any of these points of view, but rather accents them parodically, ironically, and so forth.<sup>32</sup> Leaving aside the question of intentionality on the part of the author, one can observe how in *A Suitable Boy* the narrative voice portrays the characters with varying degrees of sympathy and identification or distancing, effected through the technique of free indirect speech.

In the political debates of the novel the narrative voice identifies most strongly with the perspective of Mahesh Kapoor, the politician associated with the left-wing Nehruvite position. The voices of the other political representatives, such as that of the right-wing Agarwal, Abida Khan, or the Socialist MLA are accented parodically and ironically, and are portrayed as essentially *unreasonable*. These nuances given to the characters’ speech implicitly

mark the detachment of the narrative voice from theirs. The position of Mahesh Kapoor, and of his secretary Abdus Salaam, are implicitly identified with the narrative voice, which endorses a calm, measured, *rationalist secular* position. Other voices are completely denied such identification: "The author does not express *himself* in them (as the author of the word)—rather he *exhibits* them as a unique speech-thing, they function for him as something completely reified."<sup>33</sup>

An example of a reified voice is that of the conservative Home Minister Agarwal, whose thought, filtered through free indirect discourse, is made to appear factional, almost downright communal, and thus distanced from the narrative voice: "They were all fanatics, these Muslims, who appeared not to realize they were in this country on sufferance. A calm dose of well-applied law would do them good" (ASB 273). His thought appears in a debate in the Legislative Assembly following the police shooting of an unarmed crowd in the vicinity of a recently erected Hindu temple. Abida Khan, representative of the Muslims, flourishes her aggressive rhetoric in attacking Agarwal on the issue. Her voice is distanced from the narrative voice because her interpretation of the facts appear tendentious:

"[...] the honourable Minister should be ashamed of himself. [...] If it were the blood of his own co-religionists that was flowing in the streets, the honourable Minister would not 'wait until such time'. We know of the overt and tacit support he gives that foul organization the Linga Rakshak Samiti, set up expressly to destroy the sanctity of our mosque—"

The house was getting increasingly excited under her oratory, inappropriate though it may have been. (ASB 270-271)

---

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 299.

<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 299.



Suddenly Abdus Salaam, a left-wing Nehruvite, speaks out in the debate. He asks Agarwal why a deterrent police force was not maintained at the site of the temple itself, so that there would have been no need to fire in that panicky manner: “Why were there only a dozen men to maintain law and order in this grievously disturbed area, especially after the contents of the Friday sermon at the Alamgiri mosque became known to the authorities?” (ASB 273). Abdus Salaam’s choice to intervene in this (practically) intercommunal parliamentary debate is complicated by the fact that in asking this question, he will be perceived to be allying himself with the Democratic Party, the party of the zamindars, i.e. the conservative, feudal element.

Agarwal is enraged at this attack coming from his own party: “He was convinced that this was indeed a plot by Muslims and so-called secular Hindus to attack him—and that his own party had been infected with treason” (ASB 274). Agarwal also feels threatened by this question because it appears to embody the most rational and secular position: above factionalism, there is the meta-space of law and order, above conflicting religious discourses there is the meta-discourse of secularism itself. It is through the masterly use of free indirect discourse, and the subtle positioning of the narrative voice to coincide with the rational secular perspective, that rationalist secularism becomes a mythology, in the Barthesian sense.<sup>34</sup>

The Legislative Assembly becomes the place where the old identities (“communal” Muslim and “communal” Hindu) confront each other, and

---

<sup>34</sup> This alternating *identification* and *exhibition* of the voices in the novel ultimately lies in its effect on the reader, and which character we are made to identify with. Inevitably, we identify much more with Mahesh Kapoor than with Agarwal, or Abida Khan. Her voice comes across as a quintessentially shrill “communal” voice, though we also get the sense that her plight, and that

through this conflict a new national identity is being created, premised on a secular position. It is significant that every important historical and political event of the novel—the riot of the shoemakers, the Hindu-Muslim riot, the disaster of the Pul Mela, and of course the Zamindari Abolition Act—is followed by a debate in the parliament. The event is first represented, as an important moment in the emerging Indian polity's socio-political fabric, and then discussed by various characters in the assembly, where it is given different interpretations according to the point of view of the political party involved. It seems that the purpose of these discussions is to show that historical events retain a strong performative aspect, they are not yet settled into a pedagogical reiteration of their role in the story of the nation.<sup>35</sup> Seth seems to agree with Khilnani that Nehruvianism was a much more fluid form of political praxis than its modern day critics think.

The narrator's point of view on the success of Nehru's secular politics is that it depended more on Nehru's personal charisma and popular appeal than on a genuinely negotiated outcome between different communities.<sup>36</sup> Witness

---

of her party, the feudal landlords, must be pitied since they will soon be submerged as a ruling class by the march of history.

<sup>35</sup> "The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative." Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation", *Nation and Narration*, 297.

<sup>36</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, in analyzing the historical failures of state secularism, takes this point much further. The mistake idealistic secularists such as Nehru made, according to Bilgrami, was to consider their doctrine as a meta-doctrine, which stood above and outside the political arena where consensus on social, political and religious matters was debated and won. Bilgrami says that in order for an alternative substantive secularism, "emergent rather than assumed", to survive, it must propose itself as "a doctrine that its proponents must persuade all others (including Muslims and Hindus, whose voices it acknowledges) to agree to as an outcome of negotiation." Akeel Bilgrami, "Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity", *Secularism and Its Critics*, 400.

how the “masses” react to Nehru’s speech in favor of the Congress representative, during the electoral campaign in the village of Debaria:

Sometimes Nehru was in a reminiscent mood, sometimes he waxed poetic, sometimes he got carried away and scolded the crowd. He was, as they had sensed in their earlier slogans, rather an imperious democrat. They cheered when he talked about the size of the Bhakra dam, they cheered when he said that the Americans must not oppress Korea—whatever Korea was. And they cheered most of all when they requested his support, which he did almost as an afterthought. In the eyes of his people, Nehru—the prince and hero of Independence, the heir of Mahatma Gandhi—could do no wrong. (ASB 1354)

Seth has an unfailingly positive assessment of Nehru’s leadership because he believes it helped to save India from ulterior communal conflict for many decades after Partition.

## 2.7. Rushdie’s aesthetics of eclecticism

In contrast with *A Suitable Boy*’s omniscient third-person narrator, whose position coincides with a transcendent secularism, the Christian, Hindu, Muslim, socialist, Indian and Pakistani Saleem displays a ludic stance towards ideology of any kind, whether it is religion or rationalism. In an essay dated two years after the publication of *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie notes that books which “mix traditions, or which seek consciously to break with tradition, are often treated as highly suspect.”<sup>37</sup> Rushdie condemns the bogey of authenticity, the idea that literature is or has to be the expression of nationality. Only

---

<sup>37</sup> Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth Literature’ does not exist”, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1990), 66. Here he is referring to the poem *Jejuri* by Arun Kolatkar, a work which mixes secular and religious perspectives, as we shall see later on. The critic C.D. Narasimhaiah, “while

religious extremists believe that there is a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw:

The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, British, French, Portuguese, Marxist, Maoist, Trotskyist, Vietnamese, capitalist, and of course Hindu elements. Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition, and today it is at the centre of the best work being done in the visual arts and in literature. Yet eclecticism is not really a nice word in the lexicon of "Commonwealth literature". So the reality of the mixed tradition is replaced by the fantasy of purity.<sup>38</sup>

For Rushdie, religious extremism is placed in the same category as any excessively rigid, monolithic ideology, epitomized by Indira Gandhi's emergency, and to a lesser extent by rationalistic secularism of the dogmatic kind. Rushdie's position here is similar to Said's secular criticism, "in its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind [...]"<sup>39</sup>

## 2.8. "Light versus Dark"

*The Satanic Verses* has an episode where rationalist secularism and radical secularism confront each other. A debate on the different meanings of secularism is not surprising in the novel which most famously symbolizes the

---

admitting the brilliance of the poems, accused Kolatkar of making his work relevant by seeking to defy tradition."

<sup>38</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 68.

conflict between secular versus non-secular readings in the contemporary literary context.<sup>40</sup> The episode is an exchange between two characters in *The Satanic Verses* that excellently illuminates the ideological differences between rationalist and radical secularists, which mainly have to do with their attitudes towards religion. However the conclusion of the dialogue also demonstrates that whatever their ideological differences, ultimately both the rationalists and the radicals realize they are fighting on the same side, in a bid to find a way for a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation like India to be integrated, and to guarantee equal rights to every citizen. Religious hatred and intolerance are obviously condemned by rationalist and radical alike; both agree on the need for some sort of “universal communication”, though the radical secularist is probably more skeptical in its possibility.

The passage occurs at the end of the novel. Saladin Chamcha has just come back from London to Bombay; his father has recently died, after Saladin has finally made peace with him. Saladin’s friend Zeeny Vakil invites him to meet George and Bhupen, ““you remember””, which is said as much as anything for the reader, who is invited to think back to the beginning of the novel where there are several debates between the film director George Miranda, Bhupen Gandhi, Zeeny, and Saladin. What follows is a dialogue about the role of secular ideology in contemporary India. There is a discussion between Swatilekha,

---

<sup>39</sup> Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion of the Rushdie affair in Chapter One. While India was the first country to ban the book, the British state did not. This shows a difference in perception towards the role of religion in the public sphere. Whereas the Indian state endorses a politics of symmetry towards all religions, which recognizes the importance of religion in the life of its citizens, the British state put a secular sense of Britishness first, then religious identity. The sense of outrage felt by Muslims in Britain towards what they perceived as blasphemous passages in the book was ultimately of less socio-political value than the right of free speech; secular values triumphed over religious ones in the public sphere in Britain, whereas they did not in India.

George's new girlfriend, and Bhupen Gandhi, the poet. Swatilekha attacks Bhupen on the publication of his volume of poems "about his visit to the 'little temple town' of Gagari in the Western Ghats."<sup>41</sup> Apparently the book of poems has been criticized by the Hindu right, whereas the left-wing Swatilekha finds that "Bhupen had been seduced by religion into a dangerous ambiguity."<sup>42</sup> Bhupen defends himself: "'I have said that the only crop of Gagari is the stone gods being quarried from the hills. I have spoken of herds of legends, with sacred cowbells tinkling, grazing on the hillsides. These are not ambiguous images.'" But Swatilekha is not convinced:

"These days," she insisted, "our positions must be interpreted with crystal clarity. All metaphors are capable of misinterpretation." She offered her theory. Society was orchestrated by what she called *grand narratives*: history, economics, ethics. In India, the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had "excluded the masses of the people from the ethical project." As a result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of grand narratives, that is, religious faith. "But these narratives are being manipulated by the theocracy and various political elements in an entirely retrogressive way."<sup>43</sup>

Bhupen Gandhi answers:

"We can't deny the ubiquity of faith. If we write in such a way as to prejudice such belief as in some way deluded or false, then are we not guilty of elitism, of imposing our world-view on the masses?" Swatilekha was scornful. "Battle lines are being drawn up in India today," she cried. "Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 550. Rushdie explicitly acknowledges, in an afterword, that Bhupen Gandhi is based on the poet Arun Kolatkar, and the book of poems about "Gagari" is actually *Jejuri*.

<sup>42</sup> *The Satanic Verses*, 551.

<sup>43</sup> *The Satanic Verses*, 551.

<sup>44</sup> *The Satanic Verses*, 551.

At this point, Bhupen Gandhi gets up angrily to go. But Zeeny, Saladin's friend, manages to make him stay, saying that they can't afford schisms, "there's planning to be done." Swatilekha and Bhupen make peace, Swatilekha apologizes, blaming her "excessive" college education. "'In fact, I loved the poems. I was only arguing a case.'" The exchange concludes with the narrator stating that "the crisis had passed", and the friends go on to discuss how to go about a political demonstration in support of national integration and against communalism.

In the passage, we have a concise, illuminating representation of the debate on secular ideology in India, cast in a dialogic form. Central to the debate is the role of literature, which Swatilekha insists must have crystal clarity, since "metaphors are capable of misinterpretation." The ideological critic's reading of textual polysemy as a "dangerous ambiguity", and his/her consequent value judgement on the writer's perceived lack of "commitment", is interestingly staged in the arena of the secularism debate. Bhupen's reply to Swatilekha seems in some way to leave a space open in the literary text for an idea of religion-as-faith—namely as a way of life—as opposed to religion-as-ideology, to borrow Ashis Nandy's terminology.<sup>45</sup> For Swatilekha the opening up of the secular position to an acceptance, or at least understanding, of a lifeworld based on faith, is not a possibility, not in the times they live in. It's secular versus religious, the light versus the dark.

The dialogic form of the novel permits the staging of a debate between proponents of different forms of secularism, and indicates that fiction is eminently suited for projecting a plurality of epistemological frameworks. On

the one hand, it is shown that a literary text cannot be reduced to a political position, which is what Swatilekha seems to do. On the other hand, Bhupen cannot afford to leave his group of activists, to abandon the side, because his intellectual sensibilities have been offended. A poem can afford to present metaphors which allow religious faith to be considered as a significant worldview; the novel can use the dialogic form to foreground the validity of different ideological positions within a broadly secularist spectrum. Yet the conclusion shows the two characters' agreement on a position of what could be called "practical secularism", namely a general opposition to the non-acceptance of the other, or of the minority, that characterizes hardline politico-religious positions.

The dialogue presents us with two types of secular perspectives, one more "radical"—Bhupen Gandhi's position—and the other more "rationalist"—Swatilekha's position. Rushdie seems to arguing a case for a more literary perspective on secularism and religiosity, whose mutual relationship can only be construed by Swatilekha in the form of an ideological opposition. The discussion occurs towards the end of *The Satanic Verses*, almost a meta-literary comment on the apparently secularizing "blasphemy" of the Jahilia chapters. At the end of a novel containing a de-sacralizing representation of the life of Mohammed (albeit in the form of a dream), the author seems to leave some space for the validity of a religious perspective on the world, in quoting Bhupen Gandhi's (or Arun Kolatkar's) "dangerously" ambiguous metaphors. The dialogue form also shows up the rigidities of rationalist secularism, while

---

<sup>45</sup> See Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism", *Secularism and Its Critics*, 321-344.



allowing for its political good faith.<sup>46</sup> Rushdie clearly has an agnostic rather than rationalistic approach towards religion.

By contrast, in his essay writing, Rushdie often seems much more on the side of Swatilekha than Bhupen. In his recent writings on Islamist “fundamentalism” in the wake of 9/11, he confirms this impression of being an out-and-out secularist, as he urges Muslim nations to relegate religion to the private sphere:

If Islam is to be reconciled with modernity, these [moderate Muslim] voices must be encouraged until they swell into a roar. Many of them speak of another Islam—their private faith—and the restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal. The depoliticization of religion is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern. If terrorism is to be defeated the world of Islam must take on board the secularist-humanist principles on which the modern is based, and without which their countries’ freedom will remain a distant dream.<sup>47</sup>

Rushdie here has a clearcut rationalist secular stance, premised on an almost naïve faith in the ideal of modernity as progress. In his essay—a genre more markedly monological than the novel—he presents an unequivocal view of secularism as a necessary step in the modernization of Muslim society. By contrast, it is only through the dialogism of the novel genre that he is able to express the full complexities of the secular position in the South Asian context,

---

<sup>46</sup> Swatilekha’s rationalist secularism, in my view, is not entirely equivalent to Mufti’s concept of “majoritarian” secularism. Mufti identifies majoritarian secularism with two positions: the first is state secularism, with its implicit self-positioning as the representative of minority interests and its secular “tolerance”. The second is Nandy’s critique of state secularism from a religious perspective and his notion of religious (i.e. Hindu) tolerance towards Indian minorities. See Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”. Swatilekha is clearly much to the left of any form of “state” secularism, and thus politically distant from a figure like the character Mahesh Kapoor in *A Suitable Boy*, who is a Congress member. Yet their views on religion are similar, in that they are both rationalists in the best Nehruvian tradition: they reject religion as a series of obscurantist practices amounting to superstition.

through the heteroglossia of the various characters. Rushdie's more literary approach to the secularism issue in *The Satanic Verses* reveals the influence of Arun Kolatkar's poem *Jejuri* on his work.<sup>48</sup>

## 2.9. A wariness of any fixed belief

The dilemma between modernization and tradition, or between rationalist secularism and a religious worldview, is central to both novels, but is resolved by them in different fashion. *A Suitable Boy* resorts to an old-fashioned, but appealing Nehruvian secular rationalism for India, which unproblematically relegates religious practice to the private sphere. *Midnight's Children*, while emerging from a similar Nehruvian ideological matrix, dissolves the rigid binarism of secular versus religious, by presenting a narrator who continuously oscillates between belief and skepticism. Saleem has inherited this trait from his grandfather, Aadam Aziz: "a certain vulnerability to women, but also its cause,

---

<sup>47</sup> Rushdie, "Not About Islam?", *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002* (London: Cape, 2002), 396-397.

<sup>48</sup> Kolatkar's poetry provides a beautiful example of how to straddle religious and secular paradigms within literary language, and his skeptical spirituality strongly influenced Rushdie's own view of religion in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. *Jejuri* is a poem, or series of poems, about a trip/pilgrimage to a temple town, Jejuri. The poems present a critique of the institutionalization and commercialization of religion, while opening up a space for spirituality. The narrator of *Jejuri* is trying to go beyond tradition, towards a point of an unconventional faith: "You seem to move continually forward/towards a destination/just beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows". The critic Bruce King likens the spirituality of *Jejuri* to the *bhakti* devotional experience. In the poem "Heart of Ruin" the description of a run-down temple, full of dogs and beetles, is an apparently "secular" evocation. Yet the poem ends with the following lines: "No more a place of worship this place/is nothing less than the house of god." Kolatkar, *Jejuri* (Bombay: Pras, 1978), 12. Metaphor in Kolatkar is used as a rhetorical tool to convey a radical pluralism of worldviews, and to effect a deliberately ambiguous reshuffling of rationalist secular and religious positions. *Midnight's Children* employs a similar type of metaphor, as when Saleem says of Bombay on the eve of Independence that "the city was poised, with a new myth glinting at the corners of its eyes" (MC 112). This metaphor brings to mind Kolatkar's lines, "a herd of legends/on a hill slope/looked up from its grazing/when chaitanya came in sight." Kolatkar, *Jejuri*, 49. Indeed Rushdie's and Kolatkar's use of metaphor seems to serve a similar function as ways of bridging the gaps between conflicting worldviews.

the hole at the center of himself caused by his (which is also my) failure to believe or disbelieve in God" (MC 275). The novel starts off with the story of a man, Aadam Aziz, who experiences a religious crisis. He has just returned from medical studies abroad, and is attempting to go back to his "former self" after his brush with Western skepticism and agnosticism, by going out in the early morning to pray, though he feels caught in a strange middle ground, "trapped between belief and disbelief" (MC 12). As he kneels and bows his head towards the ground, his nose strikes against a tussock of earth, and draws blood:

And my grandfather, lurching upright, made a resolve. Stood. Rolled cheroot. Stared across the lake. And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole. (MC 12)

Thus both Aadam and Saleem share a wariness about any *fixed* belief, and Saleem shows how he continuously absorbs influences, as is exemplified by his genealogy and his biography. He is of English Christian, Hindu, and Muslim extraction, cared for by a Goan Catholic ayah, but he is also, by turns, Indian, Pakistani, and even Communist; he swallows all of these doctrines enthusiastically. Saleem's retelling of Indian history together with his own shows up the religious and mythical narratives that simultaneously accompany the founding of a secular nation through Nehru; indeed Nehru himself is revealed as a politician who consults astrologists despite all the scientific Five-Year Plans he and his advisers draw up.

In *Midnight's Children*, Bombay becomes a symbol of the vibrant multiculturalism of Nehruvian India. The city's unique character is made up of a mix of diverse cultural and religious traditions, as emerges from Saleem's half-

mythical, half-historical tale of its inception. But then we witness the progressive decline of this optimism of unbounded possibilities, through the gradual suppression and dismemberment of the Midnight's Children Club; the children gradually lose their capacity to communicate telepathically, and some die, or disappear.<sup>49</sup> Through the development of Saleem's history of the nation, we sense that Saleem wishes to recuperate the eclectic and multifarious component of Indian tradition, which is being increasingly channeled into a monolithic state ideology. The ending of the novel, however, seems to leave things open, with the almost triumphant dissolution of Saleem into 600 million constitutive entities.

## 2.10. Creating the chamchawalas

Saleem's narrative in some sense does seem to endorse a Nehruvian, or progressivist vision of India, which is seen to have contributed to the spread of a multicultural, caste- and religion-blind ethos just after Independence, in direct contrast with the sectarian atmosphere of pre-Independence days. Certainly both *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* document the rise of a middle class in which caste or religious lines are less and less marked, and new discrimination appears along class lines. In *Midnight's Children* this novel form of class discrimination is shown to be in stark contrast with the rabid communalism of the period just before Independence.

---

<sup>49</sup> This trajectory is continued in Rushdie's re-visitation of Bombay in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Here the multi-cultural Bombay of the 50s has been transformed into the Hinduized Mumbai of the 90s, dominated by underworld bosses who espouse Hindutva.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the two very different environments Ahmed and Amina Sinai, Saleem's parents, inhabit before and after Partition/Independence. Ahmed and Amina Sinai first settle in Old Delhi, in the Muslim *mohalla* (which means quarter, suburb, from the Arabic "mahalla"). Then in June 1947, just two months before Independence (and the birth of their child), the Sinais settle in a chic, cosmopolitan and Anglicized Bombay neighborhood, where the community is not bound by religious ties but rather by socio-economic ones.

The neighborhood the Sinais settle in before Independence is a markedly Muslim neighborhood, "where the cows kept away, knowing they weren't sacred here" (MC 69). It is represented as a sectarian environment, where religion, rather than class or language, is the uniting factor. Sindhi and Bengali neighbors unite against their Hindu neighbor and "hurled multilingual abuse at him from the windows" (MC 73). The Hindu Lifafa Das, the "peepshow man", is nearly lynched by a mob when a little girl gets incensed because she doesn't want to wait her turn to see into his black box containing panoramas. Amina Sinai, pregnant with her first child (whom Saleem leads us to believe is himself), rescues Lifafa Das from the lynching, through "some realization that she was her father's daughter", namely she is also opposed to superstition and religious bigotry. In return for having saved his life, Lifafa Das offers her a prophecy of her son's future by the great seer Shri Ramram Seth. And, "despite her memories of her father's skepticism and and of his thumb and forefinger closing around a maulvi's ear, the offer touched my mother in a place which answered Yes" (MC 78). Like her father, Amina is unable to entirely discard religion, though the eclecticism of Indian faith is foregrounded by the fact that the seer is

a Hindu, and that such soothsaying belongs to Hindu, rather than Muslim, tradition. The point Saleem is making here is that religion is fundamental in the construction of Indian identity, though it is conceived as part of a *syncretic* religious tradition, rather than separatist religious identities.

Saleem is always at pains to stress how his own birth, and that of the nation-state, are imagined in both secular *and* religious/mythical terms at the same time—the strange middle ground of his grandfather's agnosticism. At the eve of the birth of her child, which Saleem wants to make us think is coinciding with, and partaking of, the birth of the Indian nation, Amina is defending a Hindu; she is upholding the importance of inter-religious unity at the eve of independence.

*"Listen," my mother shouted, "Listen well. I am with child. I am a mother who will have a child, and I am giving this man my shelter. Come on now, if you want to kill, kill a mother also and show the world what men you are!" (MC 77)*

The announcement of her son's conception, the fact that from the moment of his conception he seems to have become public property, coincides with the upholding of communal unity; though the allegorical correspondence between Saleem's life-story and the biography of the Indian nation is doubly complicated by the fact that the baby she was carrying does not turn out to be her son. Amina is clearly secular, namely anti-communal, in this episode, though her secularism does not prevent her from wanting her son's future to be prophesied by a Hindu seer. Saleem's birth is heralded *both* by a defense of a secular/tolerant point of view *and* by a soothsayer; with the suggestion, given

the correspondence of allegory, that this multiple heralding could be applied to the birth of India as well.

The markedly Muslim identity of the Old Delhi neighborhood where the Sinais first settle is in stark contrast with the Methwold Estate, the Bombay neighborhood they move to in June 1947. The Bombay setting introduces an important theme of Rushdie's fiction, the category of the *chamchawalas*, the Indian comprador class who took over power directly from the hands of the colonial ruling class. Not for nothing the Sinai's new home is called Buckingham Villa, which they have bought from its British owner, William Methwold, who has sold all of his property to Indians of the "right sort":

"Select suitable persons—such as yourself, Mr Sinai!—hand everything over absolutely intact: in tiptop working order. Look around you: everything's in fine fettle, don't you agree? Tickety-boo, we used to say. Or, as you say in Hindustani: *sabkuch ticktock hai*. Everything's just fine." (MC 97)

Then Saleem goes on to tell us the make-up of his neighborhood, "the people amongst whom I spent my childhood" (MC 95): Mr Homi Catrack, a Parsi, the Ibrahims, Muslim, the Dubashes, Hindu, the Sabarmatis, Hindu, and of course his ayah Mary Pereira, Christian. The post-Independence elite is shown to be of mixed religious background, and the factor of economic class emerges as a more cohesive bond than religion. With so few days to go before Independence, the soon-to-be-ruling class is adopting the customs and ways of their ex-colonial masters:

But now there are twenty days to go, things are settling down, the sharp edges of things are getting blurred, so they have all failed to notice what

is happening: the Estate, Methwold's Estate, is changing them. Every evening at six they are out in their gardens, celebrating the cocktail hour, and when William Methwold comes to call they slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford drawls; and they are learning, about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars, and Methwold, supervising their transformation, is mumbling under his breath. Listen carefully: what's he saying? Yes, that's it. "Sabkuch ticktock hai," mumbles William Methwold. All is well." (MC 99)

In the Methwold estate Saleem shows us the creation of an indigenous ruling class for whom belonging to this or that religious community is now less marked. This "composite" and "secular" ruling class of independent India is united by a common language, English. From the multi-lingual environment of the muhalla, where the unifying factor is religion and not language or class, the Sinais have moved to a mono-lingual, Indian English-speaking middle-class neighborhood. Already the Sinais have shown themselves to be rather secularized; their move to Bombay is made by Saleem to coincide with Earl Mountbatten's announcement that India is to be partitioned. So instead of moving to Pakistan, like Amina's sister Emerald has done with her husband, they stay behind and become part of India's ruling class, rather than Pakistan's ruling class, which is characterized by power and privilege and the more "retrograde" aspects of subcontinental Islamic culture.

Yet the Sinais' frequent shifts between India and Pakistan indicate that the dilemma faced by Indian Muslims since Aadam Aziz's time has remained unaltered after Independence. The Sinais are a minority in India, which effectively amounts to the renunciation of a part of their identity as Muslims, in order to become Indian citizens. Saleem's version of historical events seems to indicate that in the early years of Independence, a fluid identity was still possible, that there were 581 "children of midnight", and that in those heady



days, there was a place for families like his in multicultural, cosmopolitan Bombay. But in *Midnight's Children* one sees that after Nehru's death, Indian secularism gradually loses its momentum, together with the promise of a democratic and multicultural society, culminating with the dark years of the Emergency.

At the center of this national drama in *Midnight's Children* is the problem of a minority identity, which inevitably spills over the borders of the Indian nation-state. A story of India told by a Muslim cannot but be a story of India and Pakistan together—Indian Muslim identity today is inextricably linked to the history of both nations, and more than ever in the traumatic event of Partition. Herein lies the novel's radical secularism, or "secular criticism", in Mufti's term:

A critique of state and society in contemporary South Asia that does not simply replicate the frozen categories of majority and minority must take as its basic premise the insight that the (Muslim) minority problematic continues to play itself out on a *subcontinental* scale, within and between three postcolonial nation-states.<sup>50</sup>

Mufti claims that an urgent task of secular criticism today is to

make possible a conceptual framework for a rethinking of 'India' in which 'Muslim' does not function as the name of minority. The obverse of this critical imperative is that Pakistan itself has to be scrupulously recognized, in the Saidian sense of that word, as an *Indian*—and not simply South Asian—polity and society.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 117.

<sup>51</sup> Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul", 118.

*Midnight's Children* successfully addresses this critical imperative by presenting us with a version of India which is both India and Pakistan; Saleem is both the middle-class boy with a Christian ayah, Hindu and Muslim parents living in the cosmopolitan city of Bombay, and the young man who fights in the Pakistani army when it invades East Pakistan.

### 2.11. Secularism and the private sphere

The new secular identity being forged for Indians after Independence tended to elide religion and caste from the public sphere and relegate it to the private sphere. In *A Suitable Boy*, the secularism espoused by the narrative voice in the political sections of the novel is counter-balanced by a celebration of distinctly traditionalist ethics in the private sphere. The Minister of Revenue Mahesh Kapoor, for example, belongs to the *khatiri* caste, the caste of merchants and traders (one of the higher castes). Kapoor's rejection of his Hindu identity in public, his adoption of the "drab new robes of secularism", are at one with his rejection of his caste identity.

The genealogy of the secular self is characterized by the freezing of caste, and to a lesser extent, of religion:

The progressivist narrative of liberal humanism (the emancipatory narrative of the left being, in this respect, a variation of it) outlines a trajectory of self-fashioning where the self gradually sheds its ethnic, caste, linguistic and gender markers and attains the abstract identity of the citizen or becomes an individual.<sup>52</sup>

Citizenship is achieved through a shedding of previous communitarian identities; for Muslims this means renouncing a large part of their identity as Muslims, and for Hindus it means repressing their caste and the outward markers of religiosity, as Mahesh Kapoor does. The emergence of the citizen-subject is premised on the notion of the human: “a substantive base that precedes and somehow remains *prior* to and outside of the structurings of gender, class, caste, or community.”<sup>53</sup>

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana note how caste hierarchy has been displaced by a secular hierarchy—a meritocracy premised on efficiency—which refigures, transforms and redeploys caste:

After the self is marked upper class/upper caste, the process of marking, as we have already suggested, becomes invisible. The recomposition of the middle class, the secular class that stands in for the nation, is thus predicated on the redeployment and othering of caste. Professing secularism enables a displacement of caste (and also community) from the middle class sphere, so that it gets marked as what lies *outside*, is *other* than, the middle class.<sup>54</sup>

Tharu and Niranjana foreground the repressed, or rather *concealed*, upper-caste/upper class component of national secularism. Caste and religion must not be allowed to enter the public domain; hence, as Vivek Dhareshwar notes, it becomes repressed by being driven into the private domain.

Haresh Khanna is a boy who is being considered by Mrs Rupa Mehra as a prospective match for her daughter Lata. He is involved in the shoe trade,

---

<sup>52</sup> Vivek Dhareshwar, “Caste and the Secular Self”, *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (December 1993), 116.

<sup>53</sup> Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender”, *Subaltern Studies*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, vol. 9 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 235.

<sup>54</sup> Tharu and Niranjana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender”, 239-240.

considered an impure profession by traditional Hindu standards. And yet the fact that he works for the Praha shoe company (modeled on the true-life Bata Shoe Company) does not entail a loss of caste in the eyes of Mrs Rupa Mehra, because it has to do with the world of work and business, which are “inevitably” modernized in cultural terms. Of course, the two spheres—the domestic and the workplace—must be kept rigorously separate in order to maintain this equilibrium between Indianization of private mores and modernization of business practices. If there is a mixture of these two spheres, a conflict can potentially arise, as when Lata and Mrs Rupa Mehra visit the shoe factory with Haresh. Both women are overpowered by the smell in the tannery: “Somewhere within [Lata] had risen an atavistic revulsion against the whole polluting business of hides and carrion and everything associated with leather” (ASB 625). Lata is shocked when Haresh tells her that he visits the tannery once a week. Those involved in the tanning of hides are seen as ultimately impure, according to deeply-ingrained Hindu belief, and are therefore generally untouchable—like those living in the Ravidaspur slum at the outskirts of Brahmpur. Haresh says to them: “An uncle of mine in Delhi thinks that I have become polluted, that I have lost caste by working with leather. Caste! I think he is a fool, and he thinks that I'm one” (ASB 626). He defends his choice to work in the tannery as a good business move:

“I am proud of the shoes I make. I don't like sitting in an office giving orders and expecting miracles. If this means that I have to stand in a pit and soak a buffalo's hide myself, I'll do it. People who work in managing agencies, for instance, are perfectly happy to deal in commodities but don't like smudging their fingers with anything except ink. If that. And they care less for quality than for profits.” (ASB 626)

Caste is denied a space in the world of business and the workplace; yet ultimately, Lata accepts Haresh's offer of marriage and thus marries within her own caste. The possibility of an inter-religious union with Kabir, the Muslim boy she is in love with, is discarded. The novel's overt Nehruvian secularism in matters pertaining to religious conflict and political practice is paradoxically undermined by its espousal of a traditionalist ethics in the private domain.

The role of English in the othering of caste and religion is essential, as we shall see in the chapter on language in the two novels. The national elite appropriated English as a "semiotic system of modernity":

to speak about caste, or to theorize it, in English, in the political idiom, however eclectic it may be, that English makes available, is already to distance caste practice as something alien to one's subject position.<sup>55</sup>

Caste then becomes repressed by being driven in the private domain, where the vernacular is often deployed. English assumes the function of a meta-language vis-à-vis caste and tradition, the one in which the meta-discourse of secularism is articulated. Thus, in the private domain, which is also the domain of the vernacular, caste practices could be reiterated or reinvented.<sup>56</sup>

In *A Suitable Boy*, the English language of the novelistic discourse is characterized by a subject-position which denies a space to caste-marks and religious connotations in the *public* sphere, while an enormous representative space is given to tradition, culture, religion—the markers of a distinctively Indian identity—in the *private* sphere. We have the celebration of secular politics in the public domain—the authorial identification with the voice of Mahesh

---

<sup>55</sup> Dhareshwar, "Caste and the Secular Self", 118.

Kapoor and his left-of-center secular politics—and the realistic prevalence of traditional casteism and religion in the private domain.

This divide is also split along the lines of gender. Here we go back to Tharu and Niranjana's formulation of the citizen-subject:

The shaping of the normative Indian/human subject involved, on the one hand, a dialectical relationship of inequality and opposition with the classical subject of Western liberalism, and, on the other, its structuring as upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu, and male.<sup>57</sup>

Mahesh Kapoor is determinedly secular in the public domain, namely the Legislative Assembly, electoral politics, and his siding with Nehru in the Congress party split; whereas in the domestic sphere, Mrs Mahesh Kapoor belongs to a revivalist Hindu organization which promotes a "purified" form of Hinduism.

The devout Mrs Mahesh Kapoor, who is never known to the reader through her own name, urges her husband to have the Ramcharitmanas, a prayer in honor of the god Ram, recited in their house. Mahesh Kapoor, however, brusquely vetoes her request:

"[...] I can't allow it in Prem Nivas. I have a secular image—and in a town like this where everyone is beating the drum of religion, I am not going to join in with the shehnai. Anyway, I don't believe in all this chanting and hypocrisy—and all this fasting by saffron-clad heroes who want to ban cow slaughter and revive the Somnath Temple and the Shiva Temple and God knows what else."

"The President of India himself will be going to Somnath to help inaugurate the new temple there—"

---

<sup>56</sup> Dhareshwar, "Caste and the Secular Self", 118.

<sup>57</sup> Tharu and Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender", 236.

“Let the President of India do what he likes,” said Mahesh Kapoor sharply. “Rajendra Babu does not have to win an election or face the Assembly. I do” (ASB 355).

For a politician of the Congress, it will not do to openly practice Hindu rituals, even if he believed in them, and Kapoor clearly does not. His wife however, “believed—though she would not have voiced this belief—that her husband was quite wrongheaded in divesting himself of the religious rites and ceremonies that gave meaning to his life and donning the drab new robes of his new religion of secularism” (ASB 355). As we have seen for Nehru, for Mahesh Kapoor religion is largely identified with a series of superstitious and pernicious traditions which must gradually disappear or adapt themselves to the new political climate of tolerance, which by implication relegates them to the private sphere.

The wedding that takes place at the opening of the novel is that between their son Pran and Savita Mehra; namely an arranged marriage between two people belonging to the same caste. It is clear that in matters like the marriage of their son, the doings of the mothers prevail. The very first pages of the novel make it clear that this marriage has been arranged by the mothers, and more specifically by Mrs Rupa Mehra, the mother of the bride. She defends her choice of husband for her older daughter by characterizing him as a “a good, decent, cultured, khatri boy” (ASB 4).

Though Mahesh Kapoor is secular in public, his relationship with his wife is completely traditional, which is represented by the fact that we never learn her name, since she is always known by the name of her husband. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor never thinks of her husband by his name, but only—and with a

bit of authorial irony—as “her lord and master the Minister of Revenue.” Yet the lord and master finds himself powerless when it comes to the organization of the wedding. It is shown as a mark of Mahesh Kapoor’s progressive open-mindedness and generosity that, contrary to Hindu tradition, he takes on all the expenses of the wedding ceremony and hosts it in his own house, nor has he at any time asked for a dowry, as is often customary. And yet he is not really allowed to manage things as he wants, since Mrs Rupa Mehra refuses to let him invite a beautiful and renowned singer of ghazals to perform at the wedding:

But Mrs Rupa Mehra, though she was not even paying for the wedding, had put her foot down. She could not have “that sort of person” singing love-lyrics at the wedding of her daughter. “That sort of person” meant both a Muslim and a courtesan (ASB 17).

The othering of the Muslim in the domestic space of the novel is intensified later on, when Maan falls in love with this courtesan, Saeeda Bai, and has an affair with her. The perils of a misalliance between Maan and Saeeda Bai form a parallel plotline to that between Lata and Kabir. In both cases, the relationships fail; interestingly, the blindness of passion is seen as the root of its cause, rather than the more obvious problems arising from inter-religious marriage. Maan ends up stabbing his best friend Firoz out of misplaced jealousy about Saeeda Bai; Lata, on a much less melodramatic note, thinks Kabir is having an affair with someone else and is shocked by her own enraged response. The wild emotions Lata and Maan suffer because of their jealousy become the reason why they put an end to their respective relationships. One can postulate a link between the strong emotions that Kabir and Saeeda Bai evoke and the fact that they are Muslims—whether the very fact of it being a



forbidden love provoked such passions in Lata and Maan. The ending of the novel achieves, in my view, only a rather superficial closure. Lata decides that Kabir is not good for her; she wants tranquillity rather than passion from her husband, not to mention that her mother would never countenance such an inter-religious union. Maan, after he stabs his friend nearly to death on her account, finds that he has begun to suffer a violent revulsion of feeling against himself and Saeeda Bai. Towards the last pages of the novel, both Kabir and Saeeda Bai are abruptly dismissed; their exit is not entirely worked through, it is not fully organic to the novelistic structure. The last image we have of Kabir is of him walking along the river disconsolately:

After a short while he came to a factory, the walls of which came down to the Ganga and prevented him from going further. But he was too tired anyway. He pressed his head against the wall.

The ceremonies will be over by now, he thought.

He hailed a boatman, and took a boat down-river back to the university and his father's house (ASB 1348).

These Muslim characters are allowed no place in the novel's purportedly "happy ending." This twist signals the narrative limits of the nation space mapped out by the novel. The novel ends on a note of uncertainty; it is not at all clear whether Lata will be happy with her new husband, or whether Maan will ever recover from his ordeal.<sup>58</sup> But finally, for Maan and Lata, tradition and family appear as empty, frightening containing devices, which will grant them, superficially, security and a comfortable existence, yet more as a desperate form

---

<sup>58</sup> Anita Desai is only partially right when she says that in the end, the errant characters are brought back into the fold of tradition and family: "Although, in their rash youth, they might be tempted by the possibilities of change, defiance, and the unknown, they learn their lessons and return, chastened, to the safety and security of the traditional, represented here, in the Indian

of escapism than anything truly solid. More tragically, in their return to the fold, they have created victims, as Maan perhaps dimly realizes when he meets Saeeda Bai for the last time. In some sense then, the construction of citizenship in the novel makes victims of the Muslims; both in the public sphere, with the implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Act which will irrevocably demote them as a ruling class in the state of Purva Pradesh, and in the private sphere, where their culture will gradually lose prominence, without there being the possibility of a more profound social integration, as the failure of inter-religious unions shows.

## 2.12. Syncretism and nationalism

Lata and Maan's attempts to work against the barriers of caste and religion are ultimately unsuccessful; the social and familial pressures bearing down upon inter-religious unions are portrayed as too strong to resist. Lata and Maan convince themselves that marrying their Muslim lovers can only bring tragedy, and the events of the novel bear this out. In the rejection of the possibility of inter-religious unions, the majoritarian secularism of the novel shows its limits. The myth of a postcolonial secular citizenship is lacerated.

An attempt to trace a genealogy of this postcolonial citizenship is present in *Midnight's Children*. The abstract, secular citizen of postcolonial India is slowly unravelled by the frequent border-crossings of the migrant Sinais, whose place of origin is Kashmir. Saleem, in speaking of Kashmir, comments on his

---

fashion, by the great god Family." Anita Desai, "Sitting Pretty", *The New York Review of Books* (May 27, 1993), 23.

family's separateness from both India and Pakistan; he is thus in a unique position to understand the origins of the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. The religio-communal basis of the conflict is "translated" into the more acceptable antagonism of mutually hostile nation-states.

Rushdie in his novel frequently touches upon the religious syncretism that underlies South Asian culture and religion. Seth, on the other hand, never comments on the artificiality of the national borders created by Partition. A way to understand differences between Rushdie and Seth is to consider Ghosh's recuperation of the syncretic tradition as a different form of conceiving citizenship in South Asia in his novel *The Shadow Lines*. Both *Midnight's Children* and *The Shadow Lines* question the "naturalized" status of Indian and Pakistani citizenship, and reveal the unfinished nature of national consolidation in South Asia.

The underlying and resilient power of religion to divide and unite above and beyond mutual expressions of "secular" hostility is exemplified in both novels by their retelling of the same historical episode, that of the disappearance of a holy Muslim relic from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar, Kashmir, at the end of 1963. Saleem links the disappearance of the relic to his grandfather, who was apparently seen, "chugha-coated, drooling in the vicinity of the Hazratbal mosque" (MC 278). Did he? Didn't he? asks Saleem. He also mentions rumours of a Central Government plot to "demoralize the Kashmiri Muslims", by stealing their sacred hair; and counter-rumour that it was Pakistani *agents provocateurs*, who stole the relic to foment unrest:

... did they? Or not? Was this bizarre incident truly political, or was it the penultimate attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son? For ten days, no food was cooked in any Muslim home; there were riots and burnings of cars; but my grandfather was above politics now, and is not known to have joined in any processions. (MC 277-278)

Finally, Saleem's grandfather dies, consumed by an internal disintegration which mirrors Saleem's later disintegration at the end of the novel.

Doctor Aadam Aziz ( *Heidelberg-returned*) died five days before the government announced that its massive search for the single hair of the Prophet's head had been successful. When the State's holiest saints assembled to authenticate the hair, my grandfather was unable to tell them the truth. (MC 278)

Thus Saleem deliberately leaves the motives for the theft of the relic ambiguous; was it a political act, or a "communal" one, or both at the same time?

*The Shadow Lines*, in narrating the same incident, similarly reveals the religious emotions that the theft of the holy relic unleashed. His narratization of the Hazratbal Mosque theft foregrounds syncretism as an alternative form of nationalism. The syncretic culture of the subcontinent, in Ghosh's version of post-Independence Indian history, cannot be understood in terms of the logic of postcolonial citizenship. Ghosh wants to tell us that the syncretic identity of South Asia cannot be reduced to these artificial lines traced by states, the "shadow lines" of the novel's title.

However, Ghosh's celebration of syncretism at times runs the risk of mythifying it in the sense in which rationalist secularism is mythified in *A Suitable Boy*, namely it becomes naturalized and de-historicized. Syncretism has a very seductive appeal, in that it presents the picture of a civilization whose communities have lived in harmony for centuries, and whose "natural"

integration was disrupted by the violent redistribution of territories in the name of competing nationalisms. Mufti warns against the risks of nostalgically idealizing the syncretic nature of traditional Indian religious life, “a syncretism which is then understood as the basis for indigenous forms of religious tolerance and coexistence.”<sup>59</sup> The problem with this picture is that typically the practitioners of “syncretic” forms of religion do not perceive them as such; it is an observation made from outside, and the communities would not conceptualize their relationship with the other communities as “syncretic”. Intermarriage, for example, would be inconceivable for most members of these communities.

In *The Shadow Lines* there is a strong tendency to emphasize the syncretic aspect of Kashmiri religious practice. We read how the Kashmiris’ reaction to the theft of the holy Muslim relic from the Hazratbal Mosque was an outrage which cut across religious boundaries; Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus *all* publicly protested against the theft of the relic. Ghosh’s narrator presents the relic as a quintessentially Kashmiri symbol, shared by people of different faiths, rather than one belonging to one specific religion:

Later, the relic was installed at the picturesque Hazratbal mosque near Srinagar. This mosque became a great centre of pilgrimage and every year multitudes of people, Kashmiris of every kind, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, would flock to Hazratbal on those occasions when the relic was displayed to the public. This is well attested, even by those European observers whose Christian sense of the necessity of a quarantine between doctrines was outraged by the sight of these ecumenical pilgrims. Thus, over the centuries, the shrine became a symbol of the unique and distinctive culture of Kashmir.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 115.

After the theft of the relic, the narrator says, there was widespread protest from the local population: “There were some incidents of rioting and a curfew was quickly declared by the authorities. But the targets of the rioters (and with what disbelief we read of this today) were not people—neither Hindus, nor Muslims, nor Sikhs—but property identified with the government and the police.”<sup>61</sup> How exactly does Ghosh’s narrator arrive at this information? Unlike Saleem, who wants us to believe his story without providing much external corroboration (apart from unacknowledged references to Stanley Wolpert’s *A New History of India*), the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* tells us that his version of events was culled from old newspapers of the time.

The probable sources for this episode do in fact sustain Ghosh’s thesis of religious syncretism as a more powerful force than religious separatism, at least in Kashmir under Nehru. But one should remember that in 1963-64, state secularism was alive and well (thanks to Nehru), so that newspapers would inevitably give a “secularist” slant to news arriving from Kashmir.<sup>62</sup> After nine days, the holy relic was “found” again by Indian Central Intelligence. This is how the *Hindustan Times*, which was probably one of Ghosh’s sources, reports the event:

Srinagar never before witnessed such joyous crowds, which included Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others. Women threw off their veils and men tossed their caps and turbans. As Muslims made for mosques and Hindus blew conches, several thousand people headed towards the

---

<sup>60</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 225.

<sup>61</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 225.

<sup>62</sup> The newspapers’ official line at the time may have influenced Ghosh’s reworking of their version of the facts, when he foregrounded the syncretic and “naturally secular” feeling among the people of Kashmir at the theft of the relic.

Hazratbal shrine six miles from here on the shores of Dal Lake to offer prayers.<sup>63</sup>

Ghosh says that in the whole Kashmiri valley there was not one single recorded incident among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. "There is a note of surprise—so thin is our belief in the power of syncretic civilizations—in the newspaper reports which tell us that the theft of the relic had brought together the people of Kashmir as never before."<sup>64</sup> The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* tells us that thanks to the leadership of Maulana Masoodi,

forgotten and unsung today as any purveyor of sanity inevitably is in the hysteria of the subcontinent—the demonstrators took out black flags instead of green, and thereby drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning.<sup>65</sup>

In the *Calcutta Statesman*, which is the probable source of another paper referred to in *The Shadow Lines* ("a well-known Calcutta daily"), the theft of the relic is commented upon thus: "Mr Nehru said he was happy that no attempt had been made to give the incident a communal colour."<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> "Missing Relic Found After 9-Day Search", *Hindustan Times* (Jan 5, 1964), 1. The reason why it is plausible that Ghosh used this newspaper is that in a parenthesis, he says that "the weather columns of the Delhi papers note that the water mains were frozen in Srinagar that day", and indeed the *Hindustan Times* of December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963, reported this fact on the same page in which it reported the theft of the sacred relic. See "Prophet's Hair Missing from Shrine", *Hindustan Times* (Dec. 28, 1963), 1; and "Water Pipes Freeze in Srinagar", *Hindustan Times* (Dec. 28, 1963), 1.

<sup>64</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 225.

<sup>65</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 225.

<sup>66</sup> "Nation Shares Kashmir's Grief", *Statesman Overseas Weekly* (Jan. 4, 1964), 3. Ghosh's foregrounding of the syncretic aspect of these public demonstrations shows a different perspective from that of historical accounts of the holy relic episode. For example, the historian Alastair Lamb says that this incident revealed the cracks behind the secular policy of Sheikh Abdullah, the Prime Minister of Kashmir at the time (and the historical model for the fictional Mian Abdullah in *Midnight's Children*): "In other words, despite years of Sheikh Abdullah and his associates apparently preaching secularism, the Islamic religion remained the most powerful stimulus for political activity in the Vale of Kashmir." Alastair Lamb, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy 1846-1990* (Hertingfordbury, Hertfordshire: Roxford Books, 1991), 207. Another historian of Kashmir also stresses the significance the holy relic had for *Muslims*, as opposed to the common syncretic identity that Ghosh stresses. Muhammad Ishaq Khan, "The Significance of the Dargah

Ghosh's retelling of the episode, by presenting us with a syncretic picture of the religious traditions of Kashmir, testifies to the "looking-glass borders" of the subcontinental nations. Syncretism, which for Ghosh becomes an essential key for reading India's past, is of course double-edged; it shows up the unity of the Kashmiris in rising up against the government, who was seen as responsible for secreting the relic to begin with, but it also leads to riots in neighboring states, like East Pakistan and even India, in Calcutta:

In fact, from the evidence of the newspapers, it is clear that once the riots had started both governments did everything they could to put a stop to them as quickly as possible. In this they were subject to a logic larger than themselves, for the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples.<sup>67</sup>

Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* foregrounds syncretism as an alternative discourse to totalizing official secularism or ethnic particularism. This idea is further developed in his subsequent book, *In An Antique Land*.<sup>68</sup> Viswanathan reads Ghosh's syncretism as a nostalgia for an undivided community, in which "the forging of national unity requires the submission to a politics of cultural identity whereby syncretism is the ideological expression of what is construed as innate." Viswanathan locates this nostalgia for an undivided community in an essentially fictional impulse:

---

of Hazratbal in the Socio-Religious and Political Life of the Muslims", *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>67</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 230.



The legislation of religious identity in nineteenth-century culture suggests that the nostalgia for an undivided community, which is presumed to have historically preceded the emergence of a modern nation-state (a nostalgia that in turn begets a robust anti-statism), is itself based on a fiction produced by the state as it absorbs multiple religious and cultural identities into a unified national identity. That the syncretic urge is essentially a fictional impulse is apparent even in the tropes that are employed in narratives of religious identity, such as interracial romance, conversion, discovery of lost familial roots, travel, and the return to the point of origin.<sup>69</sup>

For Viswanathan, syncretism, when it is not adequately historicized, is merely another version of a bland multiculturalism which denies the realities of religious difference, replaced by “frozen icons of communal solidarity.” Viswanathan notes how words like “composite culture” and “syncretic civilization” obscure the “differential, perspectival and shifting connotations of syncretism”.<sup>70</sup>

### 2.13. Conclusion

In the preceding pages I have tried to show how the concept of secularism is intimately bound up in the development of post-colonial Indian identity, through an analysis of how religious, rational secular, and radical secular perspectives are articulated in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*. Throughout the discussion, the central distinction that has been made is that between a rationalist and a radical form of secularism. Especially the concept of radical secularism attempts to “salvage” secularism for a post-colonial criticism

---

<sup>68</sup> Ghosh, *In An Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, “Beyond Orientalism: Syncretism and the Politics of Knowledge”, *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review* (5:1, 1996), n.pag., online, Sept. 2, 2003.

<sup>70</sup> Viswanathan, “Beyond Orientalism”.

of the term. Radical secularism attempts to think beyond religious separatism and statist secularism at the same time, by attempting to find a language which can communicate between rationalist and spiritual worldviews.

But more generally, the question of secularism and religion is fundamental to many literary representations of India, both in English and *bhasha* languages. It is thus important to read these post-colonial novels, *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* as texts which engage intimately with the question of religion and the public sphere, and which address this central concern of the Indian polity. Such a reading acquires a contemporary urgency in a time when the very meaning of being Indian is increasingly being hijacked by a Hindu right-wing which wishes to deny any political viability to the term "secularism".

## Chapter Three

### Types of Allegoresis in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

This chapter examines *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* as contrasting forms of allegoresis, in order to understand how they develop more inclusive or more exclusive versions of national belonging. All narrative accounts can be read as allegoreses, in the sense that the narrative arranges the events serving as its primary referents into a configuration, which transforms these events into a pattern of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce.<sup>1</sup> *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* produce two very different forms of allegoresis. Whereas Saleem explicitly casts his story as an allegory, constantly foregrounding its underlying narrativity, Seth tends to keep the manoeuvring of the plot hidden, to present it as “found” in the events he is describing. Fredric Jameson’s famous essay on Third-World literature provided an influential definition of allegory in terms of the narrative configuration of events for postcolonial criticism. In some regards, *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* can be productively read as Jamesonian national allegories. But whereas *Midnight's Children* is an “allegorical allegoresis”, *A Suitable Boy* is a “realist allegoresis”. This difference can be explained by complicating Jameson’s notion of allegory with Paul de Man’s contrast between allegory and symbol. The role of description in the two texts is functional to their different articulation of the nation as symbol in Seth’s text, and allegory in Rushdie’s text.

Comparisons between the two novels can help to reveal the implications of using symbol and allegory as tropes of the nation-space. One example is the representation of crowds and mobs, which take on different meanings as metaphors for more inclusive or more exclusive notions of citizenship. Another example is the use or subversion of realism in the two novels. A third example is the different ways in which Seth and Rushdie use novelistic time to structure their ideas of the nation.

### 3.1. Jameson's national allegory

The relationship between public and private in *Midnight's Children* is constantly mixed, and the narrator Saleem tells us of the different modes of connection between himself and India. When Saleem is born, at the stroke of midnight, August 15, 1947 (the day in which India achieved independence and became a nation), he receives a letter from the new Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in which he says that "we will be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (MC 122). Saleem continuously projects his own personal vicissitudes onto those of the nation. The interpenetration of public and private in the novel, which Jameson remarks on as a distinguishing characteristic of the "third-world text", is structured through allegory. Though strongly and definitively critiqued by Aijaz Ahmad among other critics, Jameson's essay yields considerable productive insights for an

---

<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 45.

understanding of the way in which the narrator relates to the story he is telling about India.<sup>2</sup>

Allegory, for Jameson, becomes a productive genre for third-world writing, because it allows different relationships between the public and the private sphere to take hold, in which “psychology, or libidinal investments, is to be read in primarily political and social terms”.<sup>3</sup> Jameson explains the reason for this characteristic of third-world writing by interrogating Antonio Gramsci’s notion of subalternity:

namely the feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience and obedience which necessarily and structurally develop in situations of domination—most dramatically in the experience of colonized peoples. Subalternity is not in that sense a psychological matter, although it governs psychologies; and I suppose that the strategic choice of the term “cultural” aims precisely at restructuring that view of the problem and projecting it outwards into the realm of objective and collective spirit in some non-psychological but also non-reductionist or non-economistic, materialistic fashion. When a psychic structure is objectively determined by economic and political relationships, it cannot be dealt with by means of purely objective transformations of the economic and political situation itself, since the habits remain and exercise a baleful and crippling residual effect.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> In Ahmad’s opinion, “there is no such a thing as a ‘Third World Literature’ which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge.” Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’”, *In Theory*, 96-97. Despite the undoubted truth of Ahmad’s remark, *de facto* Jameson’s definition has contributed to the formation of a postcolonial Indian English canon whose works exhibit this allegorical configuration of public and private narrative, which would link them to other postcolonial texts using the same strategy (principally African writing in English): Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1992), *The Circle of Reason* (1986), Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Mukul Kesavan’s *Looking Through Glass* (1994). There are of course many important Indian English novels who do not fit this category and put into question Jameson’s entire generalization: Seth’s other novels, *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music*, Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August* (1988), and much of R.K. Narayan’s work, to make some examples. One could say that the western academy has constituted the canon of postcolonial literature based on the notion of national allegory, so that novels who do not fit into this category are not made part of the canon. See earlier discussion in Introduction and Lazarus, “The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism”, 771-782.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Jameson, “Third-World Literature”, 76.

What I would like to suggest is that this constant osmosis between public and private enables *Midnight's Children* to stage a radical critique of contemporary India and the impossibility of ever containing it within a "modular" idea of the nation-state. India's malaise is that also that of every individual; in the case of Saleem, at least, Jameson's famous definition of "national allegory" holds true: *"the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society."*<sup>5</sup>

*A Suitable Boy*, by using realism, projects an idea of the nation-state premised on a developmental narrative tracing the coming of India into modernity, leaving its "unmodern" past behind. The two novels present a fascinating juxtaposition between two entirely different narrative modes, the first (*Midnight's Children*) premised on the conflict between secular modernity and Indian culture, the second (*A Suitable Boy*) smoothly suturing the one onto the other. Seth's novel appears as a re-appropriation of the realist mode, while Rushdie's style has been defined as fantastic realism.<sup>6</sup> Both novels engage with the realistic tradition, albeit from two opposite points of view. Seth's novel presents a re-visitation of realism's formal characteristics—omniscient narrator, linear chronology, psychologically coherent characters, all immersed in a "universe of ordered significance". The narratological model of *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, is built around its oppositional relationship to the

---

<sup>5</sup> Jameson, "Third-World Literature", 69.

<sup>6</sup> For Richard Cronin, the "English Indian novel is committed to fantasy, because its premise is the fantastic claim of one individual to embody the impossible diversity of India." Cronin, *Imagining India* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 15.

realist tradition.<sup>7</sup> There is an unreliable, at times paranoid narrator, continuous digressions, disruption of linear chronology, and the frantic search for narrative legitimation—the narrator’s fear that his “much-trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without the shred of a purpose” (MC 152). The two texts both engage with Nehruvian ideals of nationhood, but with widely different results. *Midnight’s Children* views them critically, with irony and satire—observing the life of the nation from the outside, as it were—while Seth is writing a narrative from the inside, from the point of view of the Indian bourgeoisie, the social group that benefited most from Indian independence. Whereas *Midnight’s Children* can be read as a quest for a viable idea of the post-colonial Indian nation, Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* is premised upon an idea of the Indian nation-state which is taken as a given, whose discursive structure is intimately linked to Nehru’s conception of it.

The novel tends to concentrate on four upper-class Indian families, and the author makes no attempt to hide the essentially bourgeois viewpoint of the narrative, which is contained in part within a progressive teleology of the nation. The Fifties were a very important moment in the consolidation of modern Indian identity—when

disobedience, resistance and revolt were carefully dismantled and oppositional energies were consciously diffused as the nationalist struggle was closed off and the nation-state began to establish its dominance.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon sees this dialectic with realism as a typically postmodern trait: “Postmodern fiction may problematize the conventions of teleological closure or developmental continuity, for instance, but that is not to ‘banish’ them from the scene. Indeed it logically could not, for it depends upon them.” Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 93-94.

Nehru's idea of India circulated and established many of the myths and conceptions of the nation that still survive today. An eminent example of this is *A Suitable Boy*, which constructs a "strong" idea of India, based in part on liberal progressivism, that aims to project a cultural interpretation of 1950s nationhood which could be applied to the 90s as well.

For Rushdie the construction of a national unity is much more problematic, as is exemplified by his avowedly unreliable first-person narrator. The narrator is unreliable also because he gradually emerges as a paranoiac, drawing increasingly implausible correspondences between the history of India and his autobiography:

Let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more or less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth. (MC 338)

Saleem's possible schizophrenia breaks down the separation between private and public, which is typical of the realist novel; as Jameson says of the national allegory, Rushdie does not explain the political in purely economic terms, and the personal in purely psychological ones. Saleem becomes convinced that Indira Gandhi's mass sterilization campaign during the period of the Emergency is secretly directed at him, because in the end he is sterilized as well. Saleem's paranoid delusions offer the possibility to the reader of seeing the mass sterilization campaign as a symbolic castration of India; a paranoid delusion in this case becomes a telling allegory for the state of the nation.

---

<sup>8</sup> Tharu and Lalita, "The Twentieth Century", *Women Writing in India*, 44.



For Saleem, the Emergency is a measure for eliminating completely the multifarious identities that compete with the official state version of what it means to be an Indian. Saleem's obsession with the Emergency points to this event as a key point of failure in India's democratic development, and the definitive burial of Nehru's secularist ideals.<sup>9</sup> *Midnight's Children* is also a critique of Pakistan's religious nationalism, whose citizens, "emptied of history", have learned the arts of submission:

Religion was the glue of Pakistan, holding the halves together; just as consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and our now. (MC 351)

### 3.2. Producing meaning

In *Midnight's Children*, a critique of established ideas of the nation coincides with a critique of the novel form as a meaningful structure and of the psychologically coherent character. At the beginning of the novel, Saleem ascribes his narrative urgency to his almost paranoid fear that his story will not yield up meaning: "I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning—yes, meaning—something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (MC 9).

Leo Bersani, in his analysis of classic realist fiction of the nineteenth century, remarks that

the more leisurely stretches in realistic fiction also convey the immersion of meaning in time. The well-trained reader of novels knows when to

---

<sup>9</sup> "For middle-class liberals who had taken democracy for granted and had believed that for all its inadequacies, the state did represent the interests of the people, the Emergency was a critical turning point." Tharu and Lalita, "The Twentieth Century", *Women Writing in India*, 104.

look and listen with special care; certain meanings which inform the entire narrative are dramatized more starkly, or expressed more explicitly in the privileged moments of traditional fiction.<sup>10</sup>

In *A Suitable Boy*, this “immersion of meaning in time” also results from, or contributes to, the construction of the Indian nation as an undisputed framework. This provides a solid ideological and ethical basis for the development of the novel: the main narrative events, the dialogues, the free indirect discourse, and the direct interventions on the part of the narrator. There are some privileged moments where Seth’s construction of his discourse emerges more explicitly, as in his direct comments on Nehru’s political achievements.

Bersani then goes on to comment on the sharp differences in the production of a textual meaning between realist fiction and contemporary fiction such as the nouveau roman and Thomas Pynchon’s novels:

The “trouble” with Robbe-Grillet or Pynchon is that even when they indulge in recognizably privileged or key passages, they seem to be defying us to take them as definitive or wholly serious statements. And this absence or parody of particularly meaningful moments corresponds to a diffusion of meaning, or, at the extreme, to the irrelevance or even lack of general meaning. In a novelistic universe deprived of some governing pattern of significance, all events may be equally important. No structure of meaning is powerful enough to collect all the fragments of significance into a single system.<sup>11</sup>

Rushdie acknowledges the impossibility of a powerful structure of meaning which can connect all the fragments into a single system. Hence he turns to

---

<sup>10</sup> Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 52.

allegory as the only viable narrative framework which constantly foregrounds the discrepancy between meaning and representation, as de Man says:

The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition [...] of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.<sup>12</sup>

Both novels, as said before, are allegoreses. But they use two very different narrative strategies in order to produce the meaning of their story. *Midnight's Children* is an allegory of the diachronic development of the idea of India as a nation, while Seth's novel is written in a realist mode that shapes his story into a symbol of national life.

### 3.3. Allegory and symbol

The difference between these two modes—the symbol and the allegory—is that the symbol is a naturalized trope, characterized by the unity between meaning and representation— while the allegory foregrounds the discrepancy between the world and language. My reading of *Midnight's Children* as an allegory is premised on Paul de Man's discussion of this rhetorical figure, which he contrasts with that of the symbol.<sup>13</sup> According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the symbol coincides with the emergence of an aesthetic theory that refuses to distinguish between experience and the representation of this experience. Allegory appears as rational and drily didactic, since it refers to a meaning that it does not itself constitute. It suggests a disjunction between the way the world

---

<sup>12</sup> Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality", *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971, 1983; repr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 207.

appears in reality and the way it appears in language. The symbol, on the other hand, is neo-Platonic in that it represents an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory reality that the image suggests— “the classical idea of a unity between incarnate and ideal beauty”.<sup>14</sup> A symbol aspires to be a synecdoche, a part of a whole, and participating in its nature. More generally speaking, while the allegory is a temporal device— diachronic— the symbol is a spatial device— synchronic.

A productive categorization of Rushdie’s and Seth’s two different types of allegoresis would assign *Midnight’s Children* to the sphere of the allegory, and *A Suitable Boy* to the sphere of the symbol. Rushdie’s story of the emergence of the Indian nation, told through the life, and experienced on the body, of Saleem Sinai, is diachronic. It chooses as its subject the entire arc of Indian national history, from 1915, which roughly coincides with the beginnings of the nationalist movement, to “the present”, 1977. Moreover, Saleem’s story thematizes a disjunction between India (as allegorized by the narrator) and the ideologies of the nation. Seth’s account, in many ways a *tranche de vie*, is a synchronic look at post-Independence Indian life of the 1950s. It aspires to provide an idea of India through a realistic approach that has almost a photographic quality. Seth’s narrative technique has invited comparisons with novelists such as George Eliot and Tolstoy, because his novel displays a rare belief in the possibility of a representational “authenticity” through an impressively detailed and documented reconstruction of Indian society around the time of the first general elections.

---

<sup>13</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 187-228.

<sup>14</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 189.

De Man establishes a connection between the symbolic and the mimetic mode, as opposed to irony and allegory. These last two tropes

are linked in their common de-mystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide.<sup>15</sup>

He finds that the transition from an allegorical to a symbolic theory of poetry would find its historical equivalent in the “regression” from the eighteenth-century ironic novel—for example *Tristram Shandy*—to a nineteenth-century realism—for example *Middlemarch*.

A similar trajectory can be traced by considering *Midnight's Children* as an allegory of the nation and *A Suitable Boy* as a mimesis of the nation. Seth's mimesis enacts a naturalistic correspondence between empirical and fictional time, and between a fictional and an empirical India. If we choose to read *Midnight's Children* as an allegory, then we can see the character of Saleem Sinai as the allegorical sign, which points to something—India—that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference. The language of irony, like that of allegory, asserts the knowledge of an inauthenticity:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 222.

<sup>16</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 207.

Rushdie continuously asserts the fictionality of a construct such as that of the nation-state. His novel is, in many ways, a sustained critique of subcontinental nationalism, both Indian and Pakistani, and a scathing denunciation of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. At the end of the novel, Saleem's imminent disintegration into 630 million particles of dust, each with its own story to tell, seriously questions the viability of the nation-state as an ideological construct and as a representative narrative for all of its citizens. Saleem however, does not assume a totally nihilistic attitude to historical and literary narrative. His sense of urgency in telling his story reveals his simultaneous doubt about, and desire for, a narrative structure that will bestow meaningfulness on his and the nation's history. Saleem continuously makes explicit the unconscious "editing" and the lack of objectivity in his narrative, which becomes an allegory for the inherent lack of objectivity of nationalist historical accounts:

Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time.

Does one error invalidate the whole fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything— to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? (MC 9)

For Neil ten Kortenaar, *Midnight's Children* "both undermines and presumes the possibility of history".<sup>17</sup> History is not meaningless, but it requires an act of faith, a consciousness of the arbitrary, and at the same time, useful nature of unifying representations of the nation. Especially in narrating India, whose

---

<sup>17</sup> Neil ten Kortenaar, "Midnight's Children and the Allegory of History", *ARIEL* 26:2 (Apr. 1995), 56.

centrifugal tendencies are continuously foregrounded in the novel, it is hard to escape the “fascination of form”:

As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form— or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. (MC 300)

The discrepancy foregrounded in Rushdie’s national allegory is usefully illustrated by a comparison with Seth’s naturalized representation of India. In *A Suitable Boy*, the nation is an all-inclusive concept, that moves from the individual, to the locality, to the regional state, and arrives to embrace the entire nation. Seth invents a state, Purva Pradesh, whose regional, specifically North Indian dimension is stretched to make it representative of India in its totality:

[...] this little fire was indeed the centre of the universe. For here it burned, in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, which was the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which was itself the heartland of India... and so on through the galaxies to the outer limits of perception and knowledge. (ASB 16)

The author constructs an organic idea of India through the microcosm of Brahmpur, the capital of Purva Pradesh. His naturalistic representation of the nation, where fiction and reality coincide seamlessly, is narrated in what can be described as the “mimetic-symbolic” mode. For de Man, the symbol is generally seen as “an expression of unity between the representative and the semantic function of language.”<sup>18</sup> In the symbol the radical split between sign and

---

<sup>18</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 189.

referent—the disjunction inherent in language—is glossed over, elided. In this respect symbolic diction is similar to the novel's mimetic mode of representation where fiction and reality are seen to coincide. As a realist narrative, *A Suitable Boy* does not question the unity between meaning and representation.

Not surprisingly, a successful mimesis of the nation, one that would preserve the fundamentally unitary and organic nature of Seth's idea of India, depends on the invented setting. Seth's invented state, Purva Pradesh, embodies many real features of 1950s Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.<sup>19</sup> But Seth claims that Brahmpur is based on a mixture of Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna, and Ayodhya, because "I realized quite early on that I would run into trouble if I didn't create my own city."<sup>20</sup> To anchor the novel in a real locality— Lucknow, for example— might lead readers to point out discrepancies between Seth's representation of it and their contrasting experience of the place. The national representativeness of Brahmpur and Purva Pradesh depends on the fact that they are typical, rather than specific North Indian localities. This recalls the process of nation-forming itself, seen as an idealization and selection of historical events, religious and linguistic traditions, in order to construct an organic ideology which can claim a national representativeness.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> For example, Mahesh Kapoor—the Revenue Minister of Purva Pradesh, who is very active in promoting the Zamindari Abolition Bill in the state— has a possible real-life referent in the Revenue Minister of Bihar, K.B. Sahay, who was similarly instrumental in passing the bill which abolished zamindari in Bihar. See Arvind Das, "Agrarian Change from Above and Below: Bihar 1947-78", *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 180-227.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Woodward, "Vikram Seth's Big Book", *New York Times Magazine* (May 2, 1993), late ed., *New York Times OnDisc*, online, Nexis, Feb. 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Seth's Brahmpur, in its avowed fictionality, recalls somewhat the Secondary World of fantastic literature. "Inside it, what [the storymaker] relates is "true" it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by



By contrast, all of Rushdie's localities are real, though their representation is far from realistic. Saleem's Bombay has the epiphanic quality of childhood memories, as he tells us in *Imaginary Homelands*:

Before beginning *Midnight's Children*, I spent many months trying simply to recall as much of the Bombay of the 1950s and 1960s as I could [...] I found myself remembering what clothes people had worn on certain days, and school scenes, and whole passages of Bombay dialogue verbatim, or so it seemed; I even remembered advertisements, film-posters, the neon Jeep sign on Marine Drive, toothpaste ads for Binaca and for Kolynos [...] it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentations made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.<sup>22</sup>

*Midnight's Children* is "shot" on many more locations than *A Suitable Boy*: Kashmir, Amritsar, Agra, Delhi, Bombay, Karachi, the Sundarbans, Dacca, the magicians' ghetto in Delhi, and then back to Bombay. Saleem is a dislocated and rootless hero, in comparison to Seth's characters, who are all products of their setting—they are fully rooted in it.

Ultimately, allegory appears as the only viable formal structure for Rushdie's geographically dispersive and historically ambiguous narrative. By thematizing a split between the world of reality and that of language, as embodied by the ironic, self-conscious narrator, Rushdie is able to tell a story about India which, without presuming to be *real*, as historical accounts often do, can at least aspire to be *true*. Partition and the ensuing distortion of events by two contrasting national narratives, Indian and Pakistani, make Saleem reach

---

kindliness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable." J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (1964; repr. London: Unwin, 1988), 36-37.

<sup>22</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 11-12.

the conclusion that “what’s real and what’s true aren’t necessarily the same” (MC 79). The truth value of the ironical and allegorical modes is a product of their capacity to assert and maintain their fictional character “by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world.”<sup>23</sup> This is why Saleem prefers the truth of memory to that of historiography:

“I told you the truth,” I say yet again, “Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own.” (MC 211)

This recalls very closely the words of Tridib, a character in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, when he urges the narrator to his imagination with precision. For Tridib, “we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly.” And at the question, why not take the world as it is, the answer was: “it only meant that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions.”<sup>24</sup>

Another way to read Rushdie’s and Seth’s use of allegory, as mentioned before in relation to Jameson, is as a trope that engages in personal and political dimensions at the same time. Hence Saleem’s psychological state—that of a paranoiac—is projected into the sphere of the political, so that the increasingly oppressive state that is crushing all the promises of Independence becomes primarily directed against him and the other “children of midnight”:

---

<sup>23</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 218.

No, the Emergency had a black part as well as a white, and here is the secret which had lain concealed for too long beneath the mask of those stifled days. The truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight. (MC 427)

Allegory has the capacity “to generate a range of distinct meanings or messages, simultaneously, as the allegorical tenor and vehicle change places.”<sup>25</sup> Hence in the first instance, Saleem is allegorically India, he is growing too fast, he is desperately searching for meaning, he is splitting apart under the centrifugal pressure of the many stories and identities that he has to narrate. But the Midnight’s Children Club is also an allegory of India, of the promises of Independence cut down by India’s corrupt or power-seeking politicians. The figure of the Widow, intent on doing away with Saleem, functions as an allegorical personification of Indira Gandhi, who in turn is an allegory or personification of India, even according to her own electoral slogan: “India is Indira and Indira is India”. The fear of castration—later justified—haunts Saleem, and the figure of the Widow, who is responsible for the mass sterilization campaigns during the Emergency, is a profoundly misogynistic image. The downside of allegory, as pointed out by Sunder Rajan, is precisely this conflation between different levels and their simplification:

the complexities of history and circumstance may be dissolved into the simplicities of metaphysical confrontation. In allegory the forces of despotism, rapacity, lust, reason, faith, revolution and love are merely embodied in individual figures without necessarily motivating or explaining human behavior.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Jameson, “Third-World Literature”, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, 111.

In the construction of the national allegory, characterization is sacrificed.

The literalization of metaphor that many critics have commented on can be read as a characteristic of Rushdie's national allegory.<sup>27</sup> What is traditionally metaphorical becomes literal—Saleem as the body of the nation—and what was thought at first to be literal—Saleem's ancestry—becomes metaphorical. Metaphorically speaking, Saleem is the son of Amina, Ahmed, Methwold, Vanita, Mary Pereira, and so forth. Rushdie's use of metaphor relinquishes any claim to literal truth, and is doing, irradiates its own truth, more ambiguous and polysemic, which requires an act of reflection, or probing, on the part of the reader: "Metaphor is turned into event precisely so that it will *not* be read *as* event, but folded back into metaphor as disturbing, resonant image."<sup>28</sup> *Midnight's Children* presents a juxtaposition of different representational modes: mythical, historical, cinematic, oral, realistic, as in his passage about the origins of Bombay. Again, the juxtapositions, as in a postmodern pastiche, are not seamlessly blended together in the text, but overlap, giving an overall impression of discrepancy and almost "euphoric" excess. The primeval "world before clocktowers" of the Koli fishermen, who were Bombay's original inhabitants, is described in a lyrical prose resonant with mythical allusions:

the fishermen [...] sailed in Arab dhows, spreading red sails before the setting sun. They caught pomfret and crabs, and made fish-lovers of us all [...] There were also coconuts and rice. And above it all, the benign presiding influence of the goddess Mumbadevi, whose name—Mumbadevi, Mumbabai, Mumbai—may well have become the city's [...]

---

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, ten Kortenaar: "In *Midnight's Children* the metaphor of the nation as a person is made literal and thereby comical: if India were a person it would be a grotesque such as Saleem, its paternity would be in dispute, and its ability to tell its story would be in question." Ten Kortenaar, "*Midnight's Children* and the Allegory of History", 46.

<sup>28</sup> Kumkum Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible", *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1987), 164.

but then, one day in 1633, an East Indian Company Officer named Methwold saw a vision. (MC 92)

Static timelessness is interrupted by the dynamics of history: "This vision... was a notion of such force that it set time in motion. History churned ahead..." (MC 92). Mythical or fabulistic time's struggle with national-historical time is identified here as the basic conflict in any attempt at a narrative representation of India. It recalls the beginning of the novel: "I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947" (MC 9). What should be emphasized is the effect of dissonance or discrepancy between the various juxtapositions; allegory is not a naturalized allegoresis, unlike the symbol.

### 3.4. The Function of Description

The act of description has either a containing and shaping function—in Seth—or gestures helplessly towards the untameable multiplicity of India—in Rushdie. For Leo Bersani, the nineteenth-century realist novel form constructs a myth of social order: "The ordered significances of realistic fiction are presented as immanent to society whereas in fact they are the mythical denial of that society's fragmented nature."<sup>29</sup> The centrifugal forces at work in society are signified by the looseness and elasticity of the novel form. The novel welcomes the disparate, and, in *A Suitable Boy*, it encompasses an almost staggering variety of experience; but for Bersani, it is essentially an exercise in *containing* the looseness

---

<sup>29</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 61.

to which it often appears to be casually abandoning itself.<sup>30</sup> Thus crowd scenes in *A Suitable Boy* have the role of pointing to the immense variety and diversity of India's citizens, while channeling this multiplicity within a unifying idea of the nation. In *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, this multiplicity is let loose, the centrifugal forces are allowed to infiltrate the novel form in such a way that the digression becomes a structural element in the text. A system of correspondences and repetitions is used as a narrative technique for producing a coherent text, as a sort of counter-foil to its numerous digressions. There is one paragraph in which the word "blood", together with related terms, is repeated ten times, as a way of linking various events, both public and private, into a system of correspondences: "Everything has shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form" (MC 226). Kumkum Sangari's definition of "mnemonic glue" for Gabriel García Márquez's use of repetition seems well applicable to its presence in *Midnight's Children*:

... the narratives are composed simultaneously at many levels and literally held together by repetition and retelling. The narratives return to fixed points again and again from different directions. Repetition is the mnemonic glue that binds the stories as well as that which allows the stories a point from which to depart in a *different* direction.<sup>31</sup>

Rushdie subverts the order and transparency of the realist novel, with its unstated claim to the complete knowability of the fictional world contained in it, related by the omniscient narrator. *A Suitable Boy* does not lay claim to the reality of its real-life referent—after all there is no such place as Brahmpur—but it does demand a belief in the reality of the fiction it is constructing, that the

---

<sup>30</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible", 168.

reader submit to the rules of the fictional game. On the other hand, Saleem Sinai continuously breaks this pact with the reader, for example by anticipating events that are yet to happen. He often tells us the fates of the various characters long before they actually occur—he thus eliminates traditional narrative tension and suspense, which are key conditions for the effect that the realist novel attempts to produce on its reader. But Padma, Saleem's illiterate audience, is always at his elbow, bullying him back into the world of linear narrative, "the universe of what-happened-next": "You'd better get a move on or you'll die before you get yourself born," she tells him exasperated (MC 38).

Saleem, as an allegory of the nation, portrays himself at the center of the major historical events of independent India. At the age of ten, he realizes he has a hidden gift, namely that of being able to read minds. This magical property permits him to travel in the minds of people all over India. He proceeds to do this, by entering the minds of a fat Englishwoman at the Taj Mahal, a chanting priest, an auto-rickshaw driver, a Cape Comorin fisherwoman, then gradually moving higher up in the social hierarchy: a rural landlord, the Minister of Maharashtra Morarji Desai, and finally even the Prime Minister himself (MC 173-174). Saleem's supernatural ability does not extend outside the national borders, thus acting as a connecting web between the extremely varied citizens of the Indian state. Benedict Anderson has shown how the novel contributed to nation-building by presenting the reader with different characters doing different activities *simultaneously*, within the "clocked, calendrical time" of the nation.<sup>32</sup> Both Rushdie and Seth are interested in constructing the idea of an

---

<sup>32</sup> "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community

imagined community for the reader, but Rushdie constantly points out the fictionalizing aspect of this connecting process between the various and varied characters. After Saleem has visited the minds of certain Indian citizens, he experiences a sense of omnipotence:

Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world... I was somehow *making them happen*.. which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift. "I can find out any damn thing!" I triumphed, "There isn't a thing I cannot know!" (MC 174)

Saleem here is reflecting on the hubris of the realist novelist and historian, which stems from the knowability of his or her object of study. Seth seems an eminent example of this hubris, in his attempt to map out an India metonymically, through an excess of detail.

And yet realist fiction such as Seth's is deceptive, in that it only *appears* to say everything—in fact its vast descriptive horizon is not infinite, and is shaped by the discourse of the narrator. Roland Barthes comments on the interweaving of the aesthetic and referential purposes of realist description. The aesthetic purpose has a containing function, in that it directs the set piece towards the production of a meaning. Otherwise, "if it was not subject to aesthetic or rhetorical choice, any 'seeing' would be inexhaustible by discourse."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the assumed reality of the referent prevents the description from turning into fantasy. This control over the fantastic element is precisely what

---

moving steadily down (or up) history." Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 26.

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect", *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 14.



distinguishes Seth from Rushdie, whose description of the Sundarbans (a “real” locality) is hallucinatory and hyperbolic at the same time:

The leaves in the heights of the great nipa palms began to spread like immense green cupped hands, swelling in the nocturnal downpour until the entire forest seemed to be thatched; and then the nipa-fruits began to fall, they were larger than any coconuts on earth and gathered speed alarmingly as they fell from dizzying heights to explode like bombs in the water. (MC 361)

In Seth, the aesthetic function of the description is somehow connected to the sheer minuteness of the detail, and one of the most original aspects of the novel is how he manages to turn the shoe-making process into a fascinating narrative. Haresh Khanna, one of Lata’s suitors, is required to make a shoe in three days in order to get a job at a big shoe firm:

He cut the sole leather and split it to the correct thickness. He layed it, stitched it through, and attached the heel. Then he trimmed the heel and the sole. He paused for a few minutes before starting this difficult and delicate operation; trimming was like cutting hair— a mistake would be critical and irretrievable. A pair of shoes had to be completely symmetrical, left and right absolutely in proportion to each other. (ASB 1000)

An entire page is dedicated to the description of how Haresh makes his shoe, imbued with narrative tension and suspense. Work processes of this kind form the subject of many detailed descriptions in *A Suitable Boy*.

### 3.5. Crowds and Mobs

Crowds in Indian novels have always played an important role, as images and metaphors of the nation, and what it contains or fails to contain. In what sense

do crowds represent the “people” is a question that haunts both *Midnight’s Children* and *A Suitable Boy*. In both, crowds are placed at strategic points of the narrative, where the narrator’s idea of imagined community emerges more explicitly. In *Seth*, the crowd is alternately “the people” that constitute the nation—the diversity of the crowd representing the “unity and variety of India”, to use Nehru’s expression—and what is situated outside the nation proper—the “mob” of a riot, those who are “not yet citizens”. Rushdie’s descriptions of crowds, on the other hand, point to the uncontainability of all the different lives and stories of each individual within a unifying concept of “Indianness”. The unifying impulse, represented by Saleem’s storytelling, is always already undermined by his gradual disintegration into the millions of individuals he is attempting to represent in his story.

The first crowd scene we encounter in *A Suitable Boy* is the “different world” of the older part of the city of Brahmipur, where the courtesans live, the riots take place, and life is not regulated by the Anglicized middle-class mores of the green residential “colonies”. All this is witnessed by Maan Kapoor, during his flâneur-like stroll through Misri Mandi:

Crows cawed, small boys in rags rushed around on errands (one balancing six small dirty glasses of tea on a cheap tin tray as he weaved through the crowd), monkeys chattered in and bounded about a great shivering-leaved pipal tree and tried to raid unwary customers as they left the well-guarded fruit stand, women shuffled along in anonymous burqas or bright saris, with or without their menfolk, a few students from the university lounging around a chaat-stand shouted at each other from a foot away either out of habit or in order to be heard, mangy dogs snapped and were kicked, skeletal cats mewed and were stoned, and flies settled everywhere... (ASB 97)

Seth's great operation, in *A Suitable Boy*, is the *naturalness* of his portrayal of India. The crowd scene mentioned earlier appears at the beginning of the novel, when Maan Kapoor is walking aimlessly through the town of Brahmpur. It's almost as if the purpose of the walk were to *familiarize* the reader with the town, which is the main setting of the plot, the central fictional place. Familiarization is a recurrent authorial strategy in the novel and is characterized by an informative tone, which is at the same time affective, calculated to make the reader *feel at home* in Brahmpur, Calcutta, and, to a lesser extent, the village of Debaria. The elements in the description of the crowd are presented with an immediacy that makes us *enter* the scene in some way, as if we were present at it, thus imbuing it with an impressionistic quality. In this sense, Seth's technique resembles that of nineteenth-century realist fiction such as Balzac's:

The entire description... is directed to the mimetic imagination of the reader, to his memory-pictures of similar persons and similar milieux which he may have seen; the thesis of the "stylistic unity" of the milieu, which includes the people in it, is not established rationally but is presented as a striking and immediately apprehended state of things, purely suggestively, without any proof.<sup>34</sup>

The description of the clothes worn by the multitude of guests at the Chatterjees' party present similar formal features to the description of the Misri Mandi crowd, but with an entirely different object:

British and Indian, Bengali and non-Bengali, old and middle-aged and young, saris shimmering and necklaces glimmering, crisp Shantipuri dhotis edged with a fine line of gold and hand-creased to perfection, kurtas of raw off-white silk with gold buttons, chiffon saris of various pastel hues, white cotton saris with red borders, Dhakai saris with a

---

<sup>34</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 471.

white background and a pattern in the weave— or (still more elegant) a grey background with a white design, white dinner-jackets with black trousers and black bow-ties and black patent-leather Derbys or Oxfords (each bearing a little reflected chandelier), long dresses of flowery-printed fine poplin chintz and finely polka-dotted white cotton organdy, even an off-the-shoulder silk dress or two... brilliant were the clothes, and glittering the people who filled them. (ASB 420)

This is a crowd of members of the Calcutta elite, “both British and Indian”. Their varying degrees of Westernization are reflected in the variety of their clothes, from the more ethnic dhotis and saris to the tuxedos and the silk dresses. Seth’s notations are such that, as Roland Barthes says,

no function, not even the most indirect, will allow us to justify: allied with a kind of narrative *luxury*, profligate to the extent of throwing up “useless” details and increasing the cost of narrative information.<sup>35</sup>

Seth’s “narrative luxury” betrays his urge to encapsulate the whole of reality in his novel, which Saleem Sinai recognizes as a typically Indian disease.

Not that Saleem Sinai himself behaves very differently from Seth’s omniscient narrator; he also attempts to give us exhaustive and detailed descriptions of India. But the difference is that he simultaneously foregrounds his skepticism about his own narrative project, and thus often his collective descriptions have a parodic effect:

On April 6th, 1919, the holy city of Amritsar smelled gloriously... of excrement... Amritsar dung was was fresh and (worse) redundant. Nor was it all bovine. It issued from the rumps of the horses between the shafts of the city’s many tongas, ikkas and gharries; and mules and men and dogs attended nature’s calls, mingling in a brotherhood of shit. But there were cows too: sacred kine roaming the dusty streets, each patrolling its own territory, staking its claims in excrement. And flies! Public Enemy Number One, buzzing gaily from turd to steaming turd,

---

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, “The Reality Effect”, 11.

celebrated and cross-pollinated these freely-given offerings. The city swarmed about too, mirroring the motion of the flies. (MC 32)

The scene is set in Amritsar, in the early days of the nationalist movement. Saleem's description of the city at this historical moment is constructed through the connecting element of dung, thus parodying the supposedly unifying ideals that connected Gandhi to his supporters. The people of the city rebelling against the British are seen by Saleem as forming "a brotherhood of shit", with flies "buzzing gaily from turd to steaming turd", a parodic echo of a line from the US anthem, "from sea to shining sea."

Crowds can also take on a darker meaning in Rushdie's and Seth's evocation of Indian reality, namely that of the crowd of the dispossessed, which, in its most extreme form, can take the shape of the mob. The mob is not so much what has failed to become a nation, but rather what the nation has failed by excluding. This aspect of the Indian crowd is like a latent terror, which comes out in certain moments of the text, during a riot or when a character loses her "city eyes" and confronts the frightening vastness of the poor:

When you have city eyes you cannot see the invisible people... Look, my God, those beautiful children have black teeth! Would you believe... girl children baring their nipples! How terrible, truly! And Allah-tobah, heaven forfend, sweeper women with— no! how *dreadful*! — collapsed spines and bunches of twigs, and no caste marks: untouchables, sweet Allah!... and cripples everywhere, mutilated by loving parents to ensure them of a lifelong income from begging... It's like being surrounded by some terrible monster, a creature with heads and heads and heads...(MC 81)

Amina Sinai's reaction to the people around her is sympathetic and horrified at the same time. We witness how her individual perceptions of each beggar child and sweeper woman gradually merge into her perception of them as a crowd, as

a collective object. This seems to be a typical feature of the representation of crowds in these two novels. It recalls Seth's narration of how a number of individuals gradually turns into a mob, by emphasizing its monstrous, inhuman aspect:

... a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing—wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage. (ASB 251)

This process of reification is achieved in both passages by describing the crowd as a "monster", a "thing", which is "terrible", "enraged". However, Amina Sinai's sensibility makes her struggle against this reification of the poor:

...but she corrects herself, no, of course not a monster, these poor poor people— what then? A power of some sort, a force which does not know its strength, which has perhaps decayed into impotence through never having been used... No, these are not decayed people, despite everything. (MC 81)

Saleem records both Amina's initial reifying impulse and her subsequent self-criticism of her frightened middle-class reaction. This reflective act on Amina's part signals an ideological intention on the part of the author, that of individualizing for us the crowds of the poor and the marginalized. Not only that, but he is bent on mapping their stories and histories, that "excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours", which Saleem indicates as the subject of his narration at the very beginning. "I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (MC 9). Seth's description of the mob in the streets of Misri Mandi, the old part

of Brahmipur, has none of Amina's sympathy towards the dispossessed. The crowd is represented as devoid of any political motivation, beyond a sort of blind religious fury. The mob sentiments are characterized as dangerous, in the sense that they are not geared toward nation-forming; and what the mob represents is clearly situated outside the nation-space. The mob attempts to attack the police station, but they are repelled by shots fired into the crowd by the policemen, who kill a few of them. But the whole episode is seen from the perspective of the police lieutenant who is commanding the police station. The narrative is seen through a secular, middle-class perspective; in this case, the District Magistrate, who is "forced" to order his men to shoot at the crowd. In this scene we are led to sympathize with the national forces of law and order, even in the representation of the shooting of an unarmed crowd. The passage could be read as a text of counter-insurgency.

The mobs and crowds that appear in *A Suitable Boy* are all eventually contained, controlled, reined in by the forces of law and order. By this I mean both the police and the normative force of the narrator. Take for example the passage which describes the pilgrims in the Pul Mela, a Hindu festival on the banks of the Ganges:

The roads on the Pul Mela sands among the tents and encampments were packed with people. Many were carrying rolls of bedding and other possessions with them, including pots and pans for cooking, food supplies, and perhaps a child or two tucked under an arm or clinging onto their back... Men, women and children, old and young, dark and fair, rich and poor, brahmins and outcastes, Tamils and Kashmiris, saffron-clad sadhus and naked nagas, all jostled together on the roads along the sands... all combined to give Dipankar a sense of elation. Here, he felt, he would find something of what he was looking for, or the Something that he was looking for. This was the universe in microcosm; somewhere in its turmoil lay peace. (ASB 766)

As in the first crowd scene of the novel, this crowd is seen through the eyes of a character, Dipankar, who is in somewhat comical search of the spiritual principle of life: "Dipankar was fond of making remarks such as, 'It is all the Void,' at breakfast, thus casting a mystical aura over the scrambled eggs" (ASB 418). For Dipankar the crowd of pilgrims is only superficially heterogeneous; people from different parts of India, different castes, ages and sex, are all fundamentally united by their common religion. Read like this, the scene appears as an explicitly Hindu imagining of the nation: "This was the universe in microcosm; somewhere in its turmoil lay peace" (ASB 766). This sentence reiterates the classic definition of India as a unity within diversity, as laid out in Nehru's *The Discovery of India*:

It is fascinating to find how the Bengalis, the Marathas, the Gujratis, the Tamils, the Andhras, the Oriyas, the Assamese, the Canarese, the Malayalis, the Sindhis, the Punjabis, the Pathans, the Kashmiris, the Rajputs, and the great central block comprising the Hindustani-speaking people, have retained their peculiar characteristics for hundreds of years, have still more or less the same virtues and failings of which old tradition or record tells us, and yet have been throughout these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same set of moral and mental qualities.<sup>36</sup>

There is the sense, both in Seth's and Nehru's texts, that there is a nation waiting to get out, to "come into its own"; the narrator/protagonist of the text is effecting a "discovery" of India through his description. Nehru assumed that India was an undivided subject:

that is, that it possessed a unitary self and a singular will that arose from its essence and was capable of autonomy and sovereignty. From this point of view, the task of History was to unleash this subjectivity from

---

<sup>36</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 49.



colonial control; and historiography was obliged to represent this unleashing.<sup>37</sup>

Saleem, on the other hand, de-naturalizes the representation of an India united by a common heritage and ideal, and shows up its fictional nature:

a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything was possible [...] (MC 112)

### 3.6. The construction of character

Bersani, in commenting on *Middlemarch*, notes how “the *dénouements* in realistic fiction make havoc of the verisimilitudes which the novelist has appeared to be so scrupulously observing.”<sup>38</sup> He observes that often realist novelists like Eliot, in their pursuit of an ideally unified novelistic structure, make the reticent, omniscient narrator unintentionally visible, thanks to the rather obvious—and unrealistic—manoeuvring of the strings of the plot: “The subtle, almost indefinable influence of one life on other lives has been replaced by melodramatic connections of crime and rare coincidence.”<sup>39</sup> The central dialectic of the realist novel is played out between its will to establish a myth of social order, and its inevitable recognition of the centrifugal forces that fragment society. This is certainly true of *A Suitable Boy*. The character Amit Chatterji thus comments on the novel form:

---

<sup>37</sup> Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories”, 389.

<sup>38</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 66.

“... it sprouts, and grows, and spreads, and drops down branches that become trunks or intertwine with other branches. Sometimes branches die. Sometimes the main trunk dies, and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks... It has its own life— but so do the snakes and birds and bees and lizards and termites that live in it and on it and off it. But then it’s also like the Ganges in its upper, middle, and lower courses—including its delta— of course.” (ASB 524)

The ramifications of the plot of *A Suitable Boy* testify to the vastness and diversity of its narrative material. The aim of this seems to be that of rendering the widest, and therefore most representative, portrait of Indian life within the novel form. But the plethora of information has to end somewhere, and there is a controlling and limiting function at work in the text, as a safeguard against a downward spiral into endless detail. This controlling and limiting function is generally well hidden from the reader, and becomes most apparent in the conclusion of the plot.

Indeed, the ending of a realist novel is probably its least realistic part. Here, in truth, the efforts of the narrator to create a unified and meaningful whole out of the *tranche de vie* he has chosen to represent are most evident. This is because the realist novel is structured as a teleological progression, and the *dénouement* is therefore a key element in marking the achievement of the narrative goal. Like many realist novels, this one also ends in marriage, which is how it began. As in *Middlemarch*, the most melodramatic and unrealistic events happen towards the end of the novel. Maan Kapoor stabs his best friend Firoz because he thinks he is having an affair with his mistress, and is put into jail. In an improbable twist, Firoz survives the stabbing, forgives Maan, and does not press charges; so Maan is released. Lata makes up her mind about which of the three suitors she will marry, and her wedding is the final important event of the

novel. The shy and insecure Varun miraculously passes his IAS interview, and becomes a member of the Indian Administrative Service. Throughout the novel's closing pages, we are treated to a good deal of irony, as if the narrator is gently poking fun at his own attempts to tie up the numerous threads of his plot. Indeed, what perhaps distinguishes the narrator of *A Suitable Boy* from that of *Middlemarch* is the former's self-conscious humor in relation to form, coupled with an affection for his characters that makes them appear all part of a vast extended Indian family.

The family is an important component in the construction of a realist plot, and possibly points to an osmosis between public and private that questions Jameson's rigid binary that he says is characteristic of the realist novel. Philippe Hamon notes how the use of family history acts as a mooring point in realism and as a classification of information about the various characters. Indeed, the main branches of Seth's banyan-like plot consist of four Indian families, and all the events of the story—the "the snakes and birds and bees and lizards and termites"—can be reconnected back to these characters:

So the family forms a sort of "motivated", "transparent" (Saussure) derivational field, wherein the surnames play somewhat the role of a linguistic root or stem conveying a particular piece of information... while the first names act as a kind of inflection, offering complementary information... structures, then, forming a sort of "grammar of characters"... They also form a suitable *locus* for the circulation of knowledge destined for the reader (gossip, curses, avowals, chit-chat)... necessary to understand the intrigue.<sup>40</sup>

The Indian extended family becomes a central metaphor for Seth's plot; it has many different members, but they are all classified, and find their place in the

hierarchy. Thus the members of the Chatterji family are all distinguished by their urbanity and sophisticated command of English—their belonging to the Calcutta Brahmos (an enlightened sect of Hinduism) is the basic “grammar”, or semantic code, for understanding the various characters of Amit, Kakoli, Meenakshi, Mr Justice Chatterji, etc.

The same goes for the Mehra family, though the central character, Lata Mehra, is curiously opaque given her role as heroine of the novel. Seth definitely shares with many nineteenth-century novelists “a reassuring belief in psychological unity and intelligibility.”<sup>41</sup> Such a belief helps to keep at bay the potential fragmentation of Seth’s picture of Indian society, and thus Lata does not marry outside of her caste, though the sympathy of the romantic reader tends to go to Kabir, the Muslim boy she is in love with, rather than to the prosaically cheerful Haresh Khanna, her mother’s choice. Lata’s choice restores the family harmony, which had been disrupted at the beginning, when her mother found out that she was interested in a Muslim. Lata’s intelligibility as a character—namely that of an Indian girl of good family—remains intact, thanks to her wedding to Haresh. The social pattern of the novel is ultimately recomposed.

However, as in many realist novels disruptive desire is central to the development of the plot. Indeed, if Lata hadn’t fallen in love with Kabir at the beginning, her mother would not have felt the need to accelerate the search for a suitable boy for her. Around the same time, Maan Kapoor falls in love with the courtesan Saeeda Bai when she comes to give a performance in his father’s

---

<sup>40</sup> Philippe Hamon, “On the Major Features of Realist Discourse”, *Realism*, ed. Lilian R. Furst (London: Longman, 1992), 167.

<sup>41</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 61.

house. Desire in the novel is disruptive of the social order eminently represented by Mrs Rupa Mehra. One can also read desire as a highly individualistic emotion that has no place in traditional Indian society. If the characters' final choices are any indication of the novel's underlying ethical assumptions, then it is clear that the preservation of family relationships appears more important than the individual "pursuit of happiness". Lata's self-realization must come after her mother's peace of mind, and the moment she finds out that Kabir is Muslim, she "knows" she cannot marry him:

It did not need Malati to tell her that it was impossible. Lata knew it well enough herself. She knew her mother and the deep pain and horror she would suffer if she heard that her daughter had been seeing a Muslim boy... And she could see her mother's tears as she faced the horror of her beloved daughter being given over to the nameless "them". Her old age would be embittered and she would be past consoling. (ASB 168)

The impossibility of Lata and Kabir's union is presented to the reader in such a way as to appear final, though we are kept in suspense about Lata's final decision for another 1250 pages. Generally, the novel's "domestic narrative"—the parts of the story regarding the Chatterjis and the Mehra—tends towards the preservation of the status quo, and the resolution of conflict within the boundaries of the family. Meenakshi, the wife of Arun Mehra, has an affair with Billy Irani, and gets pregnant. But even this potentially disruptive event—which would truly embitter Mrs Rupa Mehra past consoling—ends on an almost comic note:

Meenakshi, terrified that her baby might not be Arun's— and, in milder counterpoint, concerned by what a second pregnancy would do to her figure and social life— had decided to take immediate action... she had made herself quite sick with abortifacients, worry, conflicting advice and

tortuous gymnastics when one afternoon, to her relief, she had the miscarriage of her dreams. (ASB 1123)

Unlike the Western *bildungsroman*, which often documents a character's quest and discovery of his or her self, and his or her needs and aspirations, Seth's novel celebrates the importance of the great god family over the values based on individualism.

Desire appears as a trigger for action, and yet is ultimately stifled, because of its capacity to wreak havoc. Lata owns that this is the reason why she finally forsakes Kabir, because of the devastating effect that he has on her: "... when I'm with Kabir, or even away from him but thinking about him, I become utterly useless for anything. I feel I'm out of control— like a boat heading for the rocks— and I don't want to become a wreck" (ASB 1419). This rather trite expression of Lata's feeling reveals, in my view, the difficulty the author has in explaining his heroine's choice of husband. It seems as if desire has no place in a successful marriage. The ending of the novel would seem to validate Bersani's claim that "realistic fiction admits heroes of desire in order to submit them to ceremonies of expulsion."<sup>42</sup> Above all, a novel like *A Suitable Boy* seems to want to do away with ambiguity of motives and plot, though it does not always succeed. Bersani finds that as desire becomes more radically disruptive of established orders, the novel tends to become less realistic and more allegorical, and the reader encounters a certain resistance in the text against complete psychological intelligibility of the characters and a perfect teleological ordering of the plot.

---

<sup>42</sup> Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 67. See also the discussion in Chapter Two of the relationship between passion and inter-religious unions in *A Suitable Boy*.

In this sense the plot and characters of *Midnight's Children* seem to confirm the inverse proportion between the unleashing of desire and the preservation of the status quo within the novel form. Saleem's story, which also corresponds to his family story, is full of misalliances, incestuous loves, betrayals, farcical—markedly untragic—deaths. Saleem is not really the son of his parents, he falls in love with his own sister, and his son is fathered by another man. Traditional narrative events such as the birth of the protagonist, the family history, and relationships between the characters, are turned upside down.

It is important to bear in mind that the narratological model of *Midnight's Children* is built around its oppositional relationship to the realist tradition. Saleem's losses of memory and gradual physical disintegration show up his differences from Seth's psychologically coherent characters. At a certain point of the novel, Saleem sets aside the first person and speaks of himself in the third, a technique of estrangement that is intended to foreground his amnesia and his departure from his previous self after the death of his family. In this part of the novel Saleem observes himself from the outside, as if he were simply another character in the book, rather than the narrator. He stops being the center of consciousness until he regains his memory:

So I must doggedly insist that I, he, had begun again; that after years of yearning for importance, he (or I) had been cleansed of the whole business; that [...] I (or he) accepted the fate that was my repayment for love, and sat uncomplaining under a chinar tree; that, emptied of history, the buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him. To sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan. (MC 350)

Saleem points out the limitations of the traditional novelistic narrator, bound by the constrictions of syntax, which doesn't allow more than three persons in the singular. He realizes he is "only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three [...]" (MC 463).

### 3.7. Time and the Nation

Time is an integral part of Seth's and Rushdie's national allegoreses. By relating them to Homi Bhabha's theorization of this relationship, the two novels' temporal constructions can be read as complementary notions for thinking of an Indian national time. At the center of Homi Bhabha's celebrated conceptualization of the nation as a "double narrative movement"—the tension between the performative and the pedagogical—is the question of time:

Temporality resists the transparent linear equivalence of event and idea that historicism proposes; it provides a perspective on the disjunctive forms of representation that signify a people, a nation, or a national culture.<sup>43</sup>

If we eliminate historicism in our writing of the nation, then the nation ceases to be a symbol of modernity and becomes an ethnography of the "contemporary" within culture:

Such a shift in perspective emerges from an acknowledgement of the nation's interrupted address, articulated in the tension signifying the people as an *a priori* historical presence, a pedagogical object, and the

---

<sup>43</sup> Bhabha, "DissemiNation", 292.



people constructed in the performance of narrative, its enunciatory “present” marked in the repetition and pulsation of the national sign.<sup>44</sup>

What is particularly striking about Bhabha’s formulation is that he defines the fraught relationship between the performative and the pedagogical as a *tension* rather than a dialectic:

The minority does not simply confront the pedagogical, or powerful master-discourse with a contradictory or negating referent. It does not turn contradiction into a dialectical process.<sup>45</sup>

For our purposes here, we would like to focus on Bhabha’s contrasting ideas of time which form the basis of the tension between performative and pedagogical: the iterative temporality of the performative, the initially meaningless acts and casual allegiances with this or that sign or symbol making up contemporary culture within a nation-space, versus the teleological succession that constitutes the nation as a rooted historical presence. In referring to Benedict Anderson’s idea of the nation as a sociological solidity fixed in a succession of plurals, Bhabha says:

Such a pluralism of the national sign where difference returns as the same, is contested by the signifier’s “loss of identity” that inscribes the narrative of the people in the ambivalent, “double” writing of the performative and the pedagogical. The iterative temporality that marks the movement of meaning *between* the masterful image of the people and the movement of its sign interrupts the succession of plurals that produce the sociological solidity of the national narrative.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 299.

<sup>45</sup> Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 306.

<sup>46</sup> Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 305.

Given the centrality of time to conceptualizations of the nation, *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*, by presenting two different ideas of temporality, offer the two alternative poles within which to map the oscillating values of what constitutes the nation. Bhabha, elaborating on Derrida, says that the different meanings which constitute the nation do not act (only) as a plurality; he denies the co-extensive relationship between the differing values given by the people within the nation-space and the idea of national culture. It is not the case that national culture, because it means different things to different people (most exemplarily, perhaps, to minorities or migrants within the nation-space), comes to represent the sum of all these different meanings in a simplistically accumulative manner. No, these different meanings act in the direction of a *doubling*, not a plurality; they do not form an accretion of meaning which would then yield an idea of national culture, but rather effect a substitution of meaning. The self-identity of the nation is interrupted by this "ghostly iteration", by alternative discourses insinuating themselves "in-the-place-of" master discourses of the nation, rather than simply contributing to an enlargement of its boundaries that can subsume more and more different identities.<sup>47</sup> Hybridity, in Bhabha's terms, is never a melting-pot, never simply a question of the admixture of pre-given identities or essences, nor is it premised on a dialectic. Minority discourse disrupts the possibility of a supremacist alliance between the nation and the state, which is what Bhabha praises Fanon's writing for: "He explores the space of the nation without immediately identifying it with the historical institution of the state."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Viswanathan speaks of a homogenizing syncretism which is simply another version of multicultural statism. See Viswanathan, "Beyond Orientalism".

<sup>48</sup> Bhabha, "DissemiNation", 303.

Bhabha is advocating a different way of writing about the nation in terms of time, a way which will eschew the continuous historicization of events belonging to the “people’s” past, which is a characteristic of the pedagogical moment in nation-forming. Bhabha’s dialogic model of the pedagogical versus the performative helps us to better understand the difference between the two novels’ representation of time and the nation. Bhabha’s continuous insistence on iterative temporality indicates it as a ghostly time which can never be re-absorbed into Benedict Anderson’s homogeneous empty time of the nation. The limits of the modern nation become apparent only when they are transgressed. In this sense the allegory is the most eloquent trope for showing up the ambivalent and interrupted nature of “the people as a form of address”. Allegory in *Midnight’s Children* is premised on a disjunctive temporality, a displacement between the “official time” of the nation and Saleem’s temporal transgressions: his use of montage (see further on), his faulty memory, his constant digressions. Seth, on the other hand, uses a realist third-person narrative to tell of four Indian families living through events of the years between 1950 and 1952. It is a synchronic look at post-Independence Indian life of the 1950s. It is this synchronous aspect that becomes striking when compared to the diachronic and disjunctive unfolding of *Midnight’s Children*. The novels project two different forms of temporality that are both constitutive elements of a *panchronic* national time, which needs both the painstaking historicist reconstruction of Seth’s narrative of origins, the tracing of the past and future in the everyday lives of ordinary Indian citizens, and the excessive yet always inadequate body of Saleem Sinai who continuously gestures at all the Indian lives he does not contain but simultaneously strives to render an always already

insufficient idea of India. Conversely, the effect *A Suitable Boy* has on the reader is to establish a strong link of continuity between the India of the 1950s and now; in many ways it could be read as a novel depicting an Indian present. In this sense, *A Suitable Boy* is constructed as the perfect chronotope, the necessary and organic conjunction between place and time (de Man's idea of the symbol is relevant here).

The main setting of the novel is the invented city of Brahmpur, whose North Indian small-town typicality immediately evokes Narayan's antecedent invented Indian city, Malgudi. But unlike Malgudi, Brahmpur is explicitly characterized in terms of history and politics; the social and cultural causalities behind the conditions and lifestyles of its inhabitants form an integral part of the plot. Three of the four families at the center of the story live in Brahmpur, and represent three distinct types of the North Indian elite. The vicissitudes of the four families, and the relationships between their various members, shows that their actions and speeches are taken to be representative of India as a whole; they are made to stand in for the nation's citizens. Thus the aspects of the Indian middle class that the Mehrahs, the Kapoors, the Khans, and the Chatterjis represent are shown to be part and parcel of a necessary historical development of Indian state and society.

The various places in Brahmpur represented in the novel present a clear and transparent relation to a historicized time from which they spring, time and place operate in an organic conjunction in the way they are seen through the eyes of a character who is traveling through town on a tonga (horse-drawn carriage):

The tonga passed through the green residential “colonies” of the eastern part of Brahmpur, and came to Nabiganj, the commercial street that marked the end of spaciousness and the start of clutter and confusion. Old Brahmpur lay beyond it, and, almost at the western end of the old town, on the Ganges itself, stood the beautiful grounds and the still more beautiful marble structure of the Barsaat Mahal. (ASB 96)

The tonga then passes through the more westernized parts of town: “Nabiganj [...] the fashionable shopping street where the quality of Brahmpur were to be seen strolling up and down of an evening”; the Imperial Book Depot, clearly a colonial legacy in more ways than one and the site of the encounter between Lata and the unsuitable boy, Kabir; the cinema-halls, “Manorma Talkies (which showed Hindi films) and the Rialto (which leaned towards Hollywood and Ealing)” (ASB 96-97). But then the tonga turns off into a smaller road, and Maan suddenly finds himself “in a different world”, that of Old Brahmpur. Here the crowd, rather than the places, becomes the defining characteristic of the locality. This is the non-westernized, non-modern area of the city; where the ordered individuality of the middle class localities cedes its place to the anonymity, colorfulness and chaos of an Indian crowd. All of this, naturally, is seen through the eyes of a bourgeois; and the old and new parts of the city are connected together in a temporal chain of historical development. Different temporalities, the old and the new, are juxtaposed as belonging to two distinct worlds, whose difference is premised on their being situated in two different historical and developmental moments which coexist in the same city. Seth’s view of the Indian present recalls Bakhtin’s interpretation of Goethe’s sense of time:

He wanted to see *necessary connections* between this past and the living present, to understand the *necessary place* of this past in the *unbroken line* of

*historical development*. And the isolated, estranged chunk of the past was for him a “ghost”, profoundly loathsome and even frightening.<sup>49</sup>

This is the ghostly time of iteration that Bhabha identifies as the moment in which the teleological time of the nation can become unhinged. In Goethe, and in Seth, “everything has its *stable* and *necessary* place in time.”<sup>50</sup>

There is an interesting counterpoint to Maan’s view of the city of Brahmpur as he, the bourgeois flâneur, passes through it on the tonga and experiences all the *chocs* and epiphanies of the city deriving from its juxtaposed temporalities. This counterpoint is Lata Mehra’s and Amit Chatterji’s walk through the Park Street cemetery of Calcutta. Amit is a poet and is showing his sister-in-law around the city:

It was a melancholy place. Founded in 1767, it had filled up quickly with European dead. Young and old alike—mostly victims of the feverish climate—lay buried here, compacted under great slabs of and pyramids, mausolea and cenotaphs, urns and columns, all decayed and greyed now by ten generations of Calcutta heat and rain. So densely packed were the tombs that it was in places difficult to walk between them. Rich, rain-fed grass grew between the graves, and the rain poured down ceaselessly over it all. Compared to Brahmpur or Banaras, Allahabad or Agra, Lucknow or Delhi, Calcutta could hardly be considered to have a history, but the climate had bestowed on its comparative recency a desolate and unromantic sense of slow ruin. (ASB 489)

The place of British colonial history in the novel appears to be a cemetery. Lata’s first impression is that of puzzlement: “Why have you brought me here?” she asks Amit. Here the past is not connected in a vital and necessary way to the present, the way in which the various parts of the city of Brahmpur are. The oppressiveness of the Calcutta weather has contrived to turn it into a truly dead

---

<sup>49</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 33.

place, apparently devoid of significance for the young Indian. What use does Lata have for a bunch of old British cenotaphs? What use does this history have compared to that of Brahmpur or Lucknow? In Seth's novel the past can only be creative:

It must have an *effect* on the present [...] Such a creatively effective past, determining the present, produces in conjunction with the present a particular direction for the future. Thus, one achieves a *fullness of time*, and it is a graphic, visible completeness.<sup>51</sup>

Brahmpur's various parts—the university, the Barsaat Mahal, Misri Mandi, the newer city, the Legislative Assembly, the slum of Ravidaspur where the untouchables live—present a picture of a temporal completeness, indicating the continuity between the city's past, present, and future. More than a microcosm, Brahmpur is the perfect chronotope, namely “there are no events, plots or temporal motifs that are not related in an essential way to the particular spatial place of their occurrence, that could occur anywhere or nowhere (‘eternal’ plots or motifs). Everything in this world is a *time-space*, a true *chronotope*.”<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, the chronotope of Brahmpur functions synecdochically as the chronotope of the new nation. According to Bakhtin,

Goethe's historical vision always relied on a deep, painstaking, and concrete perception of the locality (*Localität*). The creative past must be revealed as necessary and productive under the conditions of a given locality, as a creative humanization of this locality, which transforms a portion of terrestrial space into a place of historical time for people, into a corner of the historical world.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 34.

<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 42.

This transformation of a place into a historicized corner of the world is of course a fictional invention. Brahmpur's representativeness relies on its typicality; everything in it is shown as necessary to portray Seth's idea of the Indian nation, premised on a progressivist and developmentalist statism. So the apparent paradox of a realist novel having to invent its own setting is explained: if the city had been real, parts of its past would run the risk of figuring as ghostly, *unheimlich* (Bhabha's ghostly and uncanny vestiges that come back to haunt the sociological solidity of the nation) as exorbitant from the organic connectedness of the nation's temporal completeness that Seth wishes to represent. Bakhtin observes that Goethe profoundly disliked ruins and vestiges of the past which had no living connection to the present, and did not like to dwell on them:

In the process of developing a sense of time, Goethe overcomes the ghostly [...], the terrifying [...], and the unaccountable [....] The ghostly, terrifying and unaccountable in it were surmounted by the structural aspects, already disclosed by us above, which are inherent in this way of visualizing time: the aspect of an *essential link* between the past and present, the aspect of the *necessity* of the past and the necessity of its place in a line of continuous development, the aspect of the *creative effectiveness* of the past, and, finally, the aspect of the past and present being linked to a necessary future.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, the chaos of Old Brahmpur is uneasily contained by the bourgeois glance; while Maan looks on, the crowd of Misri Mandi is purely an exoticized spectacle, but later, it turns, more dangerously into a mob, the quintessential failure of people to turn into citizens. The mob is a thing, not a group of people it is extraneous to the nation-state, and must be surmounted by a third-person omniscient visualization which situates itself above it, while occasionally

---

<sup>53</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 36.



identifying/merging with the free indirect discourse of the policeman in charge of quelling its violent manifestations.

On the other hand, Lata does not perceive the direct vestige of the colonial presence like the Park Street cemetery in Calcutta, as essential and living in the way in which the Barsaat Mahal is, the eighteenth-century Muslim mausoleum that adorns Brahmpur. It is not an addition to the emerging solidity of the nation's history; but rather a collection of unromantic ruins, which at first mean little or nothing to her in terms of a history she can feel a vital connection with. It takes the exegetical ability of the Indian poet in English to bring that past to life for Lata: the cemetery contains the remains of Rose Aylmer, celebrated by Walter Savage Landor.

"As does Thackeray's father and one of Dickens' sons, and the original for Byron's *Don Juan*," said Amit, with a proper Calcuttan pride. "Really?" said Lata. "Here? Here in Calcutta?" It was as if she had suddenly heard that Hamlet was the Prince of Delhi. (ASB 490)

How does the middle class at the center of the novel construct its national history? The Barsaat Mahal, and the picturesque crowd of Old Brahmpur is a part of the past which is historicized to the extent that the characters feel a vital connection with it. The Barsaat Mahal represents the native architectural and artistic glory of India, the newly "re-discovered" triumphs of a past whose greatness had been negated by colonialism, and which Lata enjoys aesthetically and emotionally because she makes an organic connection with it to her own present. This connection is most evident in the scene in which she takes a boat trip with Kabir, the Muslim boy she is in love with, down the river Ganges and they observe the Barsaat Mahal at dawn: "The Barsaat Mahal, site of

statesmanship and intrigue, love and dissolute enjoyment, glory and slow decay, was transfigured into something of abstract and final beauty." Later, Kabir laughingly reads out to Lata a historical description of the Barsaat Mahal from the *Diamond Guide to Brahmipur*, inadvertently comical because of the Indian English it is written in; the palace had been built by the local Nawab for his third wife, Fatima Jaan:

The fountains played still with fragrant [sic] water and an unceasing water rolled on the floors. The palace was not less than a heaven where beauty and charms were scattered freely. But after expiry of the One of his life what to him mattered the innumerable blooming ladies? He breathed his last on the 14 January gazing [sic] steadfastly at a picture of F. Jaan. (ASB 181)

Interestingly, the two historical sites of the Calcutta cemetery and the Barsaat Mahal belong to the same time period, the late eighteenth century. They are both cultural "shreds and patches" of the past which must be repeatedly turned into the signs of national culture; "the language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past."<sup>55</sup> And the national culture which the characters reinvent in their own minds and perceptions, through free indirect speech and dialogue, is that of the middle class to which they belong. For Lata, the cemetery becomes a site of vital interest after she learns that a piece of English literary history is enshrined there; what follows, in the dialogue between the Indian poet in English and herself on the tombs of the dead English poets and literati, is an appropriation of colonial literary tradition for their own literary purposes. What emerges from their dialogue is the figure of Amit, the poet in English whose

---

<sup>55</sup> Bhabha, "DissemiNation", 294.

cynical and ironic take on Victorian poetry makes Lata, and the reader, curious to discover what his own poetry would be like. In the case of the Barsaat Mahal as well, Lata is “instructed” about the past by a man, who is reading out the guidebook to her; though in this case, she laughingly rejects the exegesis: “Please stop. You’ll ruin the Barsaat Mahal for me”, she says to Kabir as he reads the guidebook’s pidgin Indian English out to her. All these symbolic transformations of the past can only pass through English, which is neither the nineteenth-century English of Walter Savage Landor nor the Indian English which appears to Lata as a comically bad mimicry of her own high standards, but rather the “new” English of the emergent post-Independence middle class, which draws sustenance from both linguistic models.

The novel’s “Goethian” temporality celebrates the history of the Indian middle class, whose monumental solidity is metaphorically extended, in the reader’s mind, to the physical aspect of the book. *Midnight’s Children* is also the history of a South Asian middle class, but it is represented by a very different kind of elite from the ones in *A Suitable Boy*. Saleem Sinai willfully places himself at the narrative center of the book. His neurotic “quest for centrality” is partly explained by a constant fear of marginalization, of the sort that the Indian Muslim family of the Sinais frequently face by being relegated to the corners of Indian history.

The history of Indian Muslims, as is shown in Saleem’s narrative, is often a complex negotiation between their religio-cultural identity as Muslims and their adherence to the nationalist ideals; a minority identity which resists being subsumed into the nationalist mainstream. Bhabha’s formulations in his essay “DissemiNation” seem to refer both to the western nation and to the

postcolonial nation, such as his by now canonical, and often trivialized, definition of minority discourse as one which resists the totalization of historicist and nationalist narratives, by its “antagonistic *in-between* of image and sign”. However, Bhabha’s textual example is *The Satanic Verses*, which focuses on the figure of the migrant arriving in a western nation, and who, as a “belated post-colonial, marginalizes and singularizes the totality of national culture.”<sup>56</sup> If we apply his model to *Midnight’s Children*, then the role of the minority is played by the Muslim narrator vis-à-vis the nominally Indian secular nation-state. The narrator is middle class, but his perspective is minoritarian, unlike that of *A Suitable Boy*, whose narrator is implicitly Hindu— at one point, explicitly so. The minoritarian perspective of Saleem simultaneously floods his national narrative with, and deprives it of, meaning. Saleem’s narrative is characterized by a disjunctive temporality; he strives to endow events with a causal relationship that appears as a fruit of his paranoia rather than a rational explanation. Saleem mixes the present moment in which he is writing with non-chronological events from the past; so that the story of his grandfather’s life is punctuated with observations Saleem makes in the time in which he is purportedly writing his tale. Rushdie’s method in constructing the time of the novel resembles Bakhtin’s critique of Dostoevsky, namely that his mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but coexistence and interaction.<sup>57</sup> Like Dostoevsky, Rushdie “strives to organize all available meaningful material, all material of reality, in one time-frame, in the form of a dramatic juxtaposition, and he strives to develop it extensively.”<sup>58</sup> This is in direct contrast to the way in which we have seen how

---

<sup>56</sup> Bhabha, “DissemiNation”, 318.

<sup>57</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 28.

<sup>58</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 28.

Seth constructs the time of *A Suitable Boy*, which in my view corresponds to the way in which Bakhtin describes Goethe's sense of time:

An artist such as Goethe, for example, gravitates organically toward an evolving sequence. He strives to perceive all existing contradictions as various stages of some unified development; in every manifestation of the present he strives to glimpse a trace of the past, a peak of the present-day, or a tendency of the future; and as a consequence, nothing for him is arranged along a single extensive plane. Such in any case was the basic tendency of his mode for viewing and understanding the world.<sup>59</sup>

By contrast, Rushdie is interested in exploring how to perceive various temporal stages in their simultaneity, as when he inserts "montage" scenes in the novel. At the beginning of *Midnight's Children* Saleem's grandfather, the young doctor Aadam Aziz, is being ferried across a lake in Kashmir by Tai, the ancient boatman, to pay a medical visit to the daughter of a rich landowner (scene a). This scene is fragmented into segments that are juxtaposed, as in montage, with the various segments of two other scenes differently located in time and space: b) that of his mother, lying sick on her bed, and c) that of the landowner Ghani, as he welcomes him into his house and introduces Aadam to his daughter Naseem, hidden by a perforated sheet:

[...] and then Tai shouts. "Ohé Doctor Sahib! Ghani the landowner's daughter is sick." The message, delivered curtly, shouted unceremoniously across the surface of the lake though boatman and pupil have not met for half a decade, mouthed by woman's lips that are not smiling in long-time-no-see greeting, sends time into a speeding, whirligig, blurry fluster of excitement... [a]

... "Just think, son," Aadam's mother is saying as she sips fresh lime water, reclining on a takht in an attitude of resigned exhaustion, "how life does turn out. For so many years even my ankles were a secret, and now I must be stared at by strange persons who are not even family members." [b]

---

<sup>59</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 28.

...While Ghani the landowner stands beneath a large oil painting of Diana the Huntress, framed in squiggly gold. He wears thick dark glasses and his famous poisonous smile, and discusses art. "I purchased it from an Englishman down on his luck, Doctor Sahib. 500 rupees only—and I did not trouble to beat him down. What are five hundred chips? You see, I am a lover of culture." [c] (MC 18)

Montage technique, in the director Sergei Eisenstein, becomes the cinematic equivalent of stream of consciousness:

When two shots, mutually illogical, unconnected, or even contradictory, are brought together in film, the automatic and relentless flow of images forces at least the appearance of a sequence [...]. The montage sense, which can be very generally defined as continuity out of discontinuity, forms a conceptual basis to many of these developments in modern thought and artistic creation.<sup>60</sup>

Montage foregrounds the vivid discontinuity of the narrative material, while at the same time forcing the disparate images into a continuity which is radically subjective, wholly created by the narrating self. Montage, in the example we examined, also gives the impression of simultaneity to the three scenes—in some sense, they are all happening at the same time, in Aadam's memory and then subsequently in Saleem's storytelling, as he looks back down into the past. This simultaneity negates the possibility of any ultimate narrative resolution:

This stubborn urge to see everything as coexisting, to perceive and show all things side by side and simultaneous, as if they existed in space and not time, lead Dostoevsky [and in our case, Rushdie], to dramatize, in space, even internal contradictions and internal stages in the development of a single person—forcing a character to converse with his own double with the devil, with his alter ego, with his own caricature (Ivan and Smerdyakov, Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov, and so forth).<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 81 and 84.

Simultaneity, as well as the breaking up of linear progression of the plot, is also effected within the sentence structure itself. In *Midnight's Children*, sentences often take up entire paragraphs, or last for the entire duration of a scene, a description, or a thought process. In this case, punctuation follows the associational flow of ideas in the narrator's head. Instead of full stops, we get semicolons, three dots, and dashes, as we see here:

In the heat of that silent night (I was silent; outside me, the sea rustled like distant paper; crows squawked in the throes of their feathery nightmares; the pattering noises of tardy taxicabs wafted up from Warden Road; the Brass Monkey, before she fell asleep with her face frozen into a mask of curiosity, begged, "Come on, Saleem; nobody's listening; what did you do? Tell tell tell!"... while, inside me, the voices rebounded against the walls of my skull) I was gripped by hot fingers of excitement—the agitated insects of excitement danced in my stomach—because finally, in some way I did not then fully understand, the door which Toxy Catrack had once nudged in my head had been forced open; and through it I could glimpse—shadowy still, undefined, enigmatic—my reason for having been born. (MC 163)

The impression of simultaneity is given by the syntax of the sentence, with its long parenthetical clause, which is a whole scene unto itself. The whole sentence describes his inward state, the parenthetical clause describes the outside world. "In the heat of that silent night"—an adjective referred to the narrator's state of mind is attributed to his surroundings, much like "the startled room" he mentions a few pages earlier: "Forgotten, too, the night when I was eight and a half, and my father, djinns on his breath, came into my bedroom to rip the sheets off of me and demand: "What are you up to? Pig! Pig from somewhere?" I looked sleepy; innocent; puzzled [...] And my mother, arriving nightdressed

---

<sup>61</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 28.

in the *startled room*, “Janum, for pity’s sake; the boy was only sleeping” (MC 155-156, emphasis added).

*Midnight’s Children’s* use of “literary” montage and syntax in order to give an impression of simultaneity further heightens his use of allegory as a temporal trope. Simultaneity and allegory are ways of invoking those who have been excluded from citizenship by a more normative nationalist narrative such as *A Suitable Boy*. This novel postulates an underlying unity between the people and the state through the use of a symbolic-mimetic mode of representation. Thus in Seth’s and Rushdie’s poetic economy, symbol and allegory come to signify the alternating exclusivity or inclusivity of their national idea. The next chapter will explore how their ideas of national time, as a perfect chronotope (in the case of Seth) or as marked by discontinuity (in *Midnight’s Children*), also structure their different notions of the historical sense and their configuration of national history.



## Chapter Four

### The Historical Event in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

#### 4.1. Parallel developments: history and fiction

Indian English fiction of the 80s and 90s is characterized by a renewed interest in history, questioning both the role and methods of historical writing founded on European models of conceptualizing the past. These European models were appropriated, but not entirely transformed, by the nationalist writers who provided a hegemonic historical narrative for postcolonial India. In the novels of the 80s and 90s, the narrator more self-consciously takes on the role of historian, trying to recuperate events of the past that were excluded or suppressed from the official nationalist narrative. This new historical novel in English developed in parallel with recent trends in Indian historiography, represented by the Subaltern Studies collective of historians. The original project of the *Subaltern Studies* group was grounded in a Marxist perspective:

It is the study of this historic failure of the nation to come to its own, a failure due to the inadequacy of the bourgeoisie as well as of the working class to lead it into a decisive victory over colonialism and a bourgeois-democratic revolution of the classic nineteenth-century type [...] it is the study of his failure which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 43.

Subsequently, Subaltern Studies historians distanced themselves from Marxism, and moved towards a markedly post-foundationalist approach, in the tradition of Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault.<sup>2</sup> Chakrabarty, for example, uses this passage by Guha to show how both nationalist and Marxist interpretations of Indian history assume a paradigmatic transition narrative, “of which the overriding (if often implicit) themes are those of development, modernization, and capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> When judged by these modular notions of history, the Indian historical process is viewed as grievously incomplete. British historians were the first to impose a homogenizing transition narrative on Indian pasts from a medieval period to modernity. Chakrabarty notes that the present incarnations of “medieval” and “modern” in Marxist and nationalist historiography are the terms “feudal” and “capitalist”.<sup>4</sup>

Both novels and historiography attempted to think around or beyond the modular form of the nation-state, in their recuperation or retrieval of a different form of writing about the past:

Historiography and the novel are tied together as genres which continually return to figure the Indian nation as the site of an incomplete

---

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook have opposed what they call “postfoundationalist” critiques of historical writing. They observe that the critique of foundational categories in historical writing does little to indicate how to go about “the basic, inescapably active, and interventionist task of historical interpretation.” It is unclear why a system or process should by definition be incapable of generating difference or raising resistances: “Indeed, it is only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic system that resistance, emancipation, or difference can be meaningfully identified or measured at all.” Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook, “After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34:1 (Jan. 1992), 149.

<sup>3</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> O’Hanlon and Washbrook vigorously deny the idea that foundationalist histories of India, like Marxist ones, assume an undifferentiated and monolithic notion of a complex socio-economic formation such as capital. “Capitalism as most contemporary Marxist historians see it indeed constitutes a system or process but one inherently conflictual and changeful, incapable of realizing or of stabilizing itself. It produces and operates through a wide variety of social relations of production and exploitation, which are themselves in constant transformation.” O’Hanlon and Washbrook, “After Orientalism”, 149.

or fractured modernity. The desire to find some third form of writing [...] to reproduce this fracturing not as a grievous lack in the nation but as something different or as a supplement which challenges the authority of its master narratives of nation and modernity, has been as much a part of the novel—at least since Rushdie—as it has been a part of historiography at least since *Subaltern Studies*.<sup>5</sup>

*Midnight's Children*, written from the perspective of the National Emergency, was one of the first novels in English by the post-Independence generation of Indian writers to question the nationalist representations of the Indian past and their truth-claims. *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, is underscored by the secularist and progressivist narrative of India that Nehru had laid out in *The Discovery of India*. *Midnight's Children* inaugurated a post-foundationalist approach in its “imitation of history”, that projected a significant influence on the writers of Rushdie's generation.<sup>6</sup> Other novels that projected a similar rethinking of the past and of the act of historical writing were: Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and *In An Antique Land* (1992), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1994), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), and *A Suitable Boy*.

In this chapter, I analyze the different ways in which *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* engage with Indian history. For a better understanding of how they narrate India to us, it is important to identify what are the versions of history that circulate in their two novels. Both Rushdie and Seth, like many other novelists of their generation, enter into a dialogue with Nehru: both novels have significant intertextual links with *The Discovery of India*. Their two

---

<sup>5</sup> Jon Mee, ““Itihasa”; thus it was’: *Looking Through Glass* and the Rewriting of History”, *ARIEL* 29:1 (January 1998), 146.

very different reworkings of the Nehruvian national narrative yield two opposite ideas of how to represent the past. Both novels ask to be read as “imitations of history”. However, Rushdie and Seth adopt different methods of historical recuperation, which in turn derives from their different notions of historical sense: the one genealogical, the other metaphysical, in Nietzschean terms later taken up by Foucault.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Seth recuperates and rewrites nationalist history for the 90s, in his novel, Rushdie appropriates and parodizes Nehruvian metaphors of the nascent nation-state, in order to question the nationalist interpretation of history to be found in *The Discovery of India*. I focus on the notion of event in order to compare their two different ways of “imitating history”. I draw on theories of the event, principally Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur, to analyze the truth-claims of narrative regarding both history and fiction. Subsequently I analyze certain key historical events in both novels: Partition and the transfer of power in *Midnight's Children*, the Zamindari Abolition Act and the riot in *A Suitable Boy*.<sup>8</sup> I compare Rushdie's historical interpretations to the post-foundationalist and non-elitist approach of the Subaltern Studies historians. In *A Suitable Boy*, I contrast Seth's conceptualization of the riot as a semi-spontaneous uprising with the radical rethinking of popular insurgency by the Subaltern Studies historians. A fixed point in my analysis of the two novels is their constant intertextual allusions to Nehru and how the events depicted in each novel differ from or replicate the nationalist concept of “historical event”.

---

<sup>6</sup> For the term “imitation of history”, see Patricia Merivale, “Saleem Fathered by Oskar: *Midnight's Children*, Magical Realism, and *The Tin Drum*”, *Magical Realism*, 329.

<sup>7</sup> See Foucault, “Nietzsche”.

## 4.2. Genealogy and metaphysics

*Midnight's Children* engages in a debate with Indian historical writing on the issue of *representation* of an event—either fictional or historical, by foregrounding the underlying narrativity, and therefore the symbolic or allegorical foundation, of such national history. The historical sense in the novel is genealogical: “the forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, *A Suitable Boy*, far from questioning issues of representation, can be compared to “foundational fictions” such as *The Discovery of India*, for the ideological objective underlying its configuration of events. It presents itself as a sort of narrative of origins of the Indian nation-state; a photograph of the period immediately after Independence taken in order to trace an ideal continuity between Nehru’s India and present-day India. Seth’s historical novel is “metaphysical” in Foucault’s terms:

In placing present needs at the origin, the metaphysician would convince us of an obscure purpose that seeks its realization in the moment it arises. Genealogy, however, seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations.<sup>10</sup>

The historical sense in *Midnight's Children* illustrates Nietzsche’s critique of history as elaborated by Foucault:

---

<sup>8</sup> For a review of the different historiographical accounts of the transfer of power, see H.V. Brasted and Carl Bridge, “The Transfer of Power in South Asia: An Historiographical Review”, *South Asia* 18: 1 (1994), 93-114.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche”, 154.

Nietzsche's criticism always questioned the form of history that reintroduces (and always assumes) a suprahistorical perspective: a history whose function it is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality closed upon itself; a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past; a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development.<sup>11</sup>

Saleem Sinai's idiosyncratic allegory of history can be said to be genealogical in the sense in which it is marked by an absence of teleology. Genealogy, unlike a metaphysical approach to history, does not pretend to restore an "unbroken continuity" of a buried or forgotten national past; which is the approach Nehru takes in *The Discovery of India*. The duty of genealogy

is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues to secretly animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people.<sup>12</sup>

The way in which Saleem constructs his version of the Indian past questions a historicist approach, indeed questions the entire secular foundation on which history is erected. The historical sense permeating *Midnight's Children* is far from being the "slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin". The parody of the historical novel effected by *Midnight's Children* seeks to undermine the power of history to shape our sense of self.

Like other postmodern fictions, *Midnight's Children's* subversion of realism is effected by a constant parodization or "emptying" of realist narrative

---

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche", 148.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche", 152.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche", 146.

models, while maintaining a nominal incorporation of them into the text by using them as structuring devices. Despite its naturalization of the supernatural and the mythical, *Midnight's Children* has a firm relationship to the tradition of the historical novel. That is to say, while it problematizes the conventions of teleological closure or developmental continuity, it does not do away with them completely because it depends on them in order to subvert them. Rushdie's use of magical realism functions as a form of postcolonial resistance, in the sense that it radically displaces the realist narrative tradition premised on post-Enlightenment rationalism and the imposition of "secular" models of historical writing. Magical realism has a quality of "in-betweenness" that also appears as a postmodern effect; it is a style in which "a complete transference from the realist to the fantastic mode never takes place, and the novel remains suspended between the two."<sup>13</sup> *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, presents Indian history in a teleological perspective, much like Nehru in *The Discovery of India*. The singularity of the historical event is dissolved into an ideal continuity—for example, the Zamindari Abolition Act, an act that effectively reshaped landownership and socio-economic conditions in many Indian states, is interpreted in the novel as an event that brings India one step closer to modernity. The act is interpreted according to a classic developmentalist narrative whereby the life of the state can be divided into feudalism/medievalism and modernity. As Chakrabarty points out, many modern third-world histories are written within the problematics of the "transition narrative", punctuated by the themes of development, modernization and capitalism. Such a transition narrative projects Indian

---

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse", *Magical Realism*, 410.

history along a series of binary oppositions: despotic/constitutional, medieval/modern, feudal capitalist: “And within this narrative shared by both imperialist and nationalist imaginations, the ‘Indian’ was always a figure of lack.”<sup>14</sup> Conversely, Rushdie’s construction of the historical event in his novel bears the appearance of meaningfulness only to be undermined by the increasingly evident schizophrenia of the narrator, as when he proclaims that the real reason for India’s war with Pakistan was to wipe his entire family off the face of the earth. Saleem’s continuous hints at the underlying conspiracy of history confirm the reader’s suspicion that he is a paranoid schizophrenic.

#### 4.3. What is an event?

Seth’s and Rushdie’s representation of key historical events aptly illustrates their different approaches to history. Understanding the notion of event can help to determine where historical and fictional narratives intersect. Veena Das, in speaking of the attacks on Sikhs that took place in Delhi after Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards, quotes François Furet in his definition of a “critical event”: an event that institutes a “new modality of historical action which was not inscribed in the inventory of that situation.”<sup>15</sup> After the events in Delhi, new modes of action came into being, which re-defined traditional concepts such as purity and martyrdom; it also re-defined traditional roles of women, certain castes, and the nation as a whole.

---

<sup>14</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.



*Midnight's Children* creates a deliberate discrepancy between the history Rushdie "goes to" and his fictional narrative. The history he quotes verbatim is Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*, and the historical narratives he is deflating are underscored by colonialist and nationalist ideologies.<sup>16</sup> His political target is Indira Gandhi's government, and more specifically the Emergency, seen as the final let-down of the secularist and democratic imagining of the Indian nation-state envisioned by Nehru. The novel also contains a fiercely satirical indictment of Pakistani military dictatorships, and the farce-like evocation of the military occupation of East Pakistan by Pakistani troops. Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur both found their notion of historical event on its narrativity—it is their narrative structure that distinguishes historical from natural events (which lack such a structure).<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur recognizes that "the word 'history' preserves in many languages the rich ambiguity of designating both the course of recounted events and the narrative that we construct."<sup>18</sup> Both Ricoeur and White defend the truth-claims of narrative history as opposed to non-narrative history such as that of the French *Annaliste* school. For White,

the very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which "the true" is identified with "the real" only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, truthful representations of reality, according to White and Ricoeur, are premised on their narrativity. They are both far from dismissing history as

---

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 171.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed., trans. and intr. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 294.

<sup>19</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 6.

text—they do not dissolve its referent into mere textuality. Rather, the “real” referent of history is similar to the Kantian *noumenon*, the thing-in-itself which can only be known through its phenomenal manifestations. Similarly, historical events come to us through their narratives. In this sense, then, Ricoeur and White read events as texts.

How can an event be read as a text? For Ricoeur, an event is a “meaningful action”, which, he says, is the object of the social sciences. If meaningful action can be shown to have some of the features of a text, then it follows that the human sciences—including history—are hermeneutical, “inasmuch as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text-interpretation.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike the intentionality of an utterance, in written discourse the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. Moreover, the text—as opposed to spoken discourse—is non-situational and non-ostensive. The referent of literature is the world, no longer the *Umwelt* (the environment) which was the referent of the spoken discourse:

To understand a text is at the same time to light up our own situation [...] It is this enlarging of the *Umwelt* into the *Welt* [world] which permits us to speak of the references *opened up* by the text—it would be better to say that the references open up the world.<sup>21</sup>

Ricoeur’s claim is that meaningful action can become an object of science through a kind of objectification similar to the fixing which occurs in writing. In the same way that writing becomes detached from its author, an action can get

---

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 197.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 202.

detached from its agent and have consequences of its own.<sup>22</sup> An action is a social phenomenon because it can have effects that it was not intended to have by its original agents. Historical events are a prime example of this. Historians are often hard put to isolate the role of a historical character in the course of events.

Just as written discourse is the mark of the utterance, so history, says Ricoeur, can be said to be the record of human action. Thus “human action becomes social action when written down in the archives of history.”<sup>23</sup> Just as a text breaks free of its ostensive references and develops a “world”, so the meaning of an important event transcends the social conditions of its production. Ricoeur’s point here is to show that an event, just like a text, is an open work, and therefore the meaning of an event is the sense of its forthcoming interpretations.<sup>24</sup> For Ricoeur, procedures of validation in literature and the social sciences have a polemical character, much like claims made in court:

In front of the court, the plurivocity common to texts and to actions is exhibited in the form of a conflict of interpretations, and the final interpretation appears as a verdict to which it is possible to make appeal.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Ricoeur sees the moments of explanation and understanding as parts of the “hermeneutical circle”—one moment leads to the other, and vice versa. He cites the case of structuralism, which claimed to be able to explain a text through a detailed analysis of its structure. But analysis could never stop at a mere

---

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur characterizes the “objectivity” of a text according to four distinctive traits: 1) the fixation of the meaning 2) its dissociation from the mental intention of the author 3) the display of non-ostensive references 4) the universal range of its addresses. See Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 210.

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 207.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 208-209.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 212.

exposition of the structure, without an investigation into a “depth-semantics”, the “ultimate referent of the myth” under analysis. To understand a text, says Ricoeur, is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says, to what it talks about.<sup>26</sup> It is to go beyond mere structural analysis to an exploration of the world that the text opens up.

Having determined the structural similarity between event and text, it remains to be seen in what ways fictional and historical narratives intersect. White and Ricoeur show up the importance of plot in historical narratives as a way of endowing events with meaning. Ricoeur finds that plot is an essential structural element in a historical narrative, as much as in a literary or mythic one. Any narrative is composed of a chronological dimension, called by Ricoeur the episodic dimension, which answers the question, what happened next? It is the sum of the events in the story. But to this must be added a non-chronological dimension, the so-called configurational dimension, which constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events. In order for an event to be historical, it must be more than a singular occurrence. It must have a place in a configuration, in a narrative:

The art of narrating, as well as the corresponding art of following a story, therefore require that we are able *to extract a configuration from a succession*[...] in grasping together events in configurational acts, the narrative operation has the character of a judgement and more precisely of a “reflective” judgement in the Kantian sense of the term.<sup>27</sup>

The difference between history and fiction is that history deals with real events and fiction with imaginary ones. For Ricoeur, the exchange between these two

---

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 218.

opposed referential modes is what brings our historicity, or historicality, to language. The difference, Hayden White notes, in the plot of a historical narrative as opposed to a fictional one, is that, given that real events are the content of historical stories, then the form in which historical events are presented should seem to be “found”, rather than constructed:

[...] reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience. Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all along, they give to reality the odor of the ideal. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as “found” in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.4. The chutnification of history

Saleem Sinai continuously shows up the plotted nature of the narrative. History is shown as a method for fictionalizing experience, founded on the illusion of a centered consciousness capable of giving formal coherency to the world he perceives: “But this is to mistake a ‘meaning’ (which is always constituted rather than found) for ‘reality’ (which is always found rather than constituted).”<sup>29</sup> Saleem views the telling of his own story as a desperate search for meaning, which alone can give a form to his life and which must be accomplished before the complete dissolution of his own body. Saleem continuously makes clear the perils of mistaking meaning for reality, of substituting a “found” plot for an

---

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 278-279.

<sup>28</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 36.

invented one in the configuration of historical events. Saleem's incessant allegorizing in the novel is a delirium with social and political overtones:

every delirium is first of all the investment of a field that is social, economic, political, cultural, racial and racist, pedagogical, and religious: the delirious person applies a delirium to his family [...] that overreaches them on all sides.<sup>30</sup>

Saleem's occasional posturing as a dispassionate chronicler of his life and time satirizes the point of view of the historian, who is supposed to have an "analytical and unprejudiced eye". The recent history of the subcontinent has, in effect, been made the target of many differing, yet reportedly "objective" interpretations, which all stake a claim to the most veridical version of events. Newspapers play an important role in the shaping of national versions of Indian and Pakistani history. Saleem tells how an illicit smuggling activity at the border posts between India and Pakistan caused an encounter between the smugglers and the Pakistani soldiers who manned the outposts. The soldiers, taking the smugglers for ghosts, fled in terror. In reality, the smuggling was headed by Saleem's uncle Zulfikar, a general in the Pakistani army. But the smugglers were "transformed" into Indian invaders by the Pakistani newspapers:

Hidden behind newspaper reports—DASTARDLY INDIAN INVASION REPELLED BY OUR GALLANT BOYS—the truth about General Zulfikar became a ghostly, uncertain thing; the paying-off of border guards became, in the papers, INNOCENT SOLDIERS MASSACRED BY INDIAN FAUJ; and who would spread the story of my uncle's vast smuggling activities? What General, what politician did not possess the transistor radios of my uncle's illegality, the air-conditioning units and the imported watches of his sins? (MC 337)

---

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1984), 274.

Later, during the course of the Pakistani war, Saleem wonders about the air raids over Pakistan, whether they actually occurred or not—Indian radio denied it, Pakistani radio announced a curfew. “Did bombs fall? Were explosions true? Could even a death be said to be the case?” (MC 340)

Given the distortion of events in Pakistani and Indian official narratives, historical objectivity is viewed with a skeptical eye by Saleem, who is constantly revealing the “plots” behind recent events in South Asia. Saleem’s “historical” explanations for the Indo-Pakistani war and for the Emergency are consciously made to appear the fruit of a paranoid and grotesque imagination. For this reason his story is manifestly not a history, which entails stylistic exclusions, such as the religious and magical events, and “the kinds of ‘grotesque’ events that are the stuff of farce, satire, calumny.”<sup>31</sup> These exclusions set limits on what constitutes a specifically historical event: in effect, history writing entails a disciplining of the imagination. The boundaries between fiction and history, in some cases, can be reduced to mere stylistic differences. Whereas historical narrative privileges the the so-called middle style of declamation, fictional narrative has complete freedom over the styles it adopts. *Midnight’s Children* emphasizes the constant interchangeability of historical and fictional narratives by definitively blurring the boundaries not only between fiction and history, but between “serious” narrative and farce. Saleem’s version of history is more catholic than that of the historian Stanley Wolpert—it includes magical events and prophecies. He is effecting the chutnification of history, which includes many disparate ingredients:

I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans... Believe don't believe but it's true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed on the amnesiac nation. (MC 460)

Saleem explains his narrative technique (or historical "method") by comparing it to chutney-making. He wishes to include memories and dreams among the raw materials required for chutnification, but he also points out the "inevitable distortions" of his way of writing history:

In the spice bases, I reconcile myself to the inevitable distortions of the pickling process [...] a certain alteration, a certain intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all [...] to give it shape and form—that is to say, meaning. (I have mentioned my fear of absurdity.) (MC 461)

Saleem's philosophy of history places an emphasis on its inherent narrativity, much like Ricoeur and White. It is important to add, however, that just because both are narratives does not mean that history is somehow "dissolved" into fiction, into a general relativism and radical uncertainty about our pasts. On the contrary, our constitution as temporal beings can only be brought to expression in narrative form: "[...] the historicity of human experience can be brought to language only as narrativity [...]"<sup>32</sup> Moreover, this narrativity can be articulated only by the crossed interplay between history and fiction. In other words, both referential modes are necessary for our historicity— also translated as historicality, or "within-time-ness"—to be brought into language. This

---

<sup>31</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 294.



intersection between fiction and history is a vital exchange, emphasizing the narrativity of history, while at the same time drawing attention to the mimesis inherent in fiction. To recognize the values of the past as different to those of the present is an opening up of the real toward the possible, according to Ricoeur. For him, there is only a history of the potentialities of the present; the imaginative potential contained in the present of which the historian takes full advantage.<sup>33</sup>

White points out that the purpose of the historical narrative is not dispelling false beliefs about the past:

what it does is test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of 'imaginary' events.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, historical truth depends on its narrativity, yet precisely because of this characteristic, it is of a different order from scientific truth. Saleem does not doubt history's veracity (or that of fiction, for that matter), but rather the value of its pretended objectivity:

One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth... that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (MC 461)

The overpowering taste of Saleem's historical pickles recalls the possible suffering from the antidote prescribed by Nietzsche for the "historically sick":

---

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 295.

<sup>34</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 45.

The ahistorical and the suprahistorical are the natural antidotes to the stifling of life by the historical, to the historical sickness. It is likely that we, the historically sick, will also have to suffer from these antidotes. But the fact that we suffer from them provides no evidence at all that we could call the correctness of the chosen therapy into question.<sup>35</sup>

Saleem's position might be said to be similar to Ricoeur's concluding question:

Could we not say, in conclusion, that by opening us to what is different, history opens us to the possible, whereas fiction, by opening us to the unreal, leads us to what is essential in reality?<sup>36</sup>

#### 4.5.1. Historical intertexts in *Midnight's Children: A New History of India*

*Midnight's Children* is postmodern in the sense that it incorporates different narrative genres—historical writing, fiction, oral tales—in order to circumscribe their validity, or at the very least to equalize them. From about 1947 onwards, Saleem's narrative is punctuated by passages from Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*, that are quoted almost verbatim in the text. This text helps to provide a chronology of the nation parallel to that of Saleem Sinai's life-and-times. It also provides a containing structure for the myriad directions in which the text could escape, beginning with the narrative possibilities offered by stories of each of the 582 children born at midnight of August 15, 1947. Rushdie's constant use of Wolpert appears as another example of that "national longing for form", expressed here through the parodic or often merely

---

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, "The Utility and Liability of History", 164. For a discussion of the parallels between Rushdie's, Nietzsche's and Gandhi's versions of history, see Aruna Srivastava, "'The Empire Writes Back': Language and History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*", *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Postcolonialism and Postmodernism*, ed. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 65-78.

instrumental incorporation of a standard textbook version of Indian history. Incorporating *A New History of India*—almost as if Saleem has the book by his bedside as he is writing down his story—is a way of countering Saleem’s anxiety that his “much-trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without the shred of a purpose” (MC 152). Rushdie incorporates the historical source into the text by leaving it to speak for itself in parenthetical clauses: its information “undigested”, unprocessed by the narrative voice.

Wolpert’s is an “official” history, with a well-defined narrative form: “established origins, narrative watersheds, and an agreed-upon chronology of significant events.”<sup>37</sup> It focuses on an account of major political movements and characters, the “official history” that makes parenthetical appearances within Saleem’s saga, designed to keep his story “on track”. It follows Gyan Pandey’s definition of a “standard historiographical procedure”. Since the nineteenth century, this procedure appears to have required taking a prescribed center (of a state formation, of a nation-state) as one’s vantage-point and the “official” archive as one’s primary source for the construction of an adequate “general history”.<sup>38</sup>

If Wolpert presents a standard interpretation of South Asian history in this regard, then Rushdie’s narrative of historical events such as Partition shows an interest in recuperating a history from below. In yet another historiographical approach to Partition, the historians Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose place responsibility of Partition on the shoulders of the prime movers of the Indian

---

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 296.

<sup>37</sup> Ten Kortenaar, “*Midnight’s Children* and the Allegory of History”, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Gyan Pandey, “In Defense of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today”, *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29.

Congress Party, especially Nehru. They claim that the leader of the Muslim League, M.A. Jinnah, was “forced” into opting for a “moth-eaten” Pakistan through the greed for central power on the part of the Congress, who was “ready and eager to take power at the British centre at the price of partitioning Bengal and Punjab.”<sup>39</sup> Jalal and Bose’s, as well as Wolpert’s accounts of the transfer of power are to some extent elitist, because they focus on the intricate negotiations at a high political level that ultimately led to Partition. Pandey, a Subaltern Studies historian, emphasizes the need for historiography to look at the pressure exerted on politicians by the militant mass movements of the period, for example the sectarian strife that began in August 1946 in Calcutta and then spread to eastern Bengal, Bihar, and other provinces. This may have played a decisive part in bringing about Partition. Pandey reads Jalal’s and other “elitist” historians’ conceptualization of Partition as a way of “Othering” the history of sectarian strife, so that it is not perceived to be a part of “real” Indian history,

a move towards the Otherization of actions that are not centred on state-building, or seen as otherwise contributing to the march of modernity and progress. Yet the ‘march’ of modernity and progress, that is to say, its self-representation, cannot be accepted as its history. For this necessarily suppresses other dimensions of the history of modern state formation, and of the violence unleashed by the forces of modernity (capitalism) and the nation-state.<sup>40</sup>

Pandey’s appeal for a more inclusive history of Partition, which will take into account the lives and experiences of the people who lived through the time and

<sup>39</sup> See Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 184.

<sup>40</sup> Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness”, *Subaltern Studies: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*, ed. David Arnold and David Hardiman, vol. 8 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 214.

not only depict the crisis of the nationalist leadership, seems to be consonant with Rushdie's depiction of Partition, which does not concern itself so much with assigning responsibility to this or that politician as in showing it up as the first and crucial failure of the "optimism disease"—one of the terms used by Saleem to define the non-sectarian nationalism represented by Mian Abdullah.

The moment in Indian history known as "the transfer of power" is explicitly allegorized by the transfer of Methwold's Estate to the Sinais and other middle-class families. Saleem's telling of the story gives a version of events in which it appears that India went directly from the hands of the British into the hands of the comprador class. They were the so-called brown sahibs, who retained the social customs and the administrative structures of the British as a condition for the transfer of power into their hands: "because the price, after all, was right" (MC 98). At a first reading, it might seem that, for Rushdie, the ruling elite of the new Indian Union merely substituted that of the Raj. However, a closer look at the dialogue between Methwold, the departing British imperialist, and Ahmed Sinai the member of the Indian comprador class, tells a different story. The dialogue between Methwold and Ahmed alternates with that of Ahmed and his wife, who is appalled at Methwold's conditions, namely that they are not allowed to change anything in the house before the transfer of property, which will be completed on midnight of August 15, 1947. "And look at the stains on the carpets, janum; for two months we must live like these Britishers? You've looked in the bathrooms? No water near the pot. I never believed, but it's true, my God, they wipe their bottoms with paper only!..." (MC 96). Amina Sinai cannot believe that she is forced to keep everything the same when the house has now become legitimately hers.

Saleem's account of the transfer of power certainly does not paint a favorable picture of the national elite; indeed, he shows that the real winner seems to have been the Indian business class—represented by Ahmed Sinai—while no mention is made of the role of the Congress Party in negotiating the independence process. However, one person remains relatively untouched by colonial mimicry: Amina Sinai. She has “somehow escaped the subtle magic of Methwold's Estate, remaining uninfected by cocktail-hours, budgerigars, pianolas and English accents...” (MC 100). Amina Sinai can be read as an allegory for the indigenous component of the Indian brand of political democracy, which will inevitably make its own changes in the administration structure inherited by the British; but also as a gendered reaction to the male structure of power handed over from the British colonizer to the Indian (male) elite.

The birth of India itself is lived as a trauma, not as a life-giving act. The trauma is emphasized by the intertextual allusions to Nehru's “tryst with destiny” speech—the fabrication of the “collective fantasy”, the Indian nation-state—which is juxtaposed with the violent birth of two separate nations, India and Pakistan. These countries are born at the same time as Saleem and Shiva, who are exchanged at birth so that Saleem becomes “the chosen child of midnight” (MC 117):

The monster in the streets has already begun to celebrate; the new myth courses through its veins, replacing its blood with corpuscles of saffron and green. And in Delhi, a wiry serious man sits in the Assembly Hall and prepares to make a speech. (MC 115)

The “new myth” that will soon become India is both saffron and green, both Hindu and Muslim. But it is also a monster: in Rushdie’s text, saffron and green herald both Nehru’s dream of a united secular India and the burning trains of the refugees of Partition:

And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest dias in the world. (MC 115)

The trauma of birth, and a dual birth at that, is the soundtrack to Nehru’s speech in Saleem’s narrative:

The monster in the streets has begun to roar, while in Delhi a wiry man is saying, “... At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom...” And beneath the roar of the monster there are two more yells, cries, bellows, the howls of children arriving in the world, their unavailing protests mingling with the din of independence which hangs saffron-and-green in the night sky—“A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long-suppressed finds utterance...” (MC 116)<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.5.2. Historical intertexts in *Midnight’s Children: The Discovery of India*

Saleem’s story continues an important tradition in Indian English writing—which was to have a notable influence on the novel of the 80s and 90s—that of the “public” autobiography, or the autobiographical history.

---

<sup>41</sup> By contrast, in *A Suitable Boy*, Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” speech is transformed into social banter, an in-joke that only Indians who have been force-fed Indian nationalist history at school would recognize. The occasion is towards the end of a party of old college friends: “A little later the guests started taking their leave. Sunil suggested that they all visit Old Brahmpur ‘to see if anything was going on’. ‘Tonight at the midnight hour,’ he intoned in a sing-song, Nehruvian voice, ‘while the world sleeps, Brahmpur will awake to life and freedom’” (ASB 34).

Chakrabarty remarks of Nirad Chaudhuri's autobiography that "our autobiographies are remarkably public (with constructions of public life that are not necessarily modern) when written by men, and tell the story of the extended family when written by women."<sup>42</sup> Other examples of this writing are Nayantara Sahgal and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi's *Autobiography, or the Story of my Experiments with Truth*, originally written in Gujarati, is probably the most well-known Indian autobiography of the independence movement.<sup>43</sup> In their works, their life-story is shown to be closely intertwined with the life and evolution of the nation, especially in Nehru's *The Discovery of India* and Sahgal's memoir *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954). A closer look at this work reveals the startling extent to which Rushdie has appropriated some of the framing statements used by Nehru to connect his history of India to his personal experiences, in order to create a completely different national allegory. Yet the same time, this comparison reveals the important influence Nehru's prose and ideology had on the writing of *Midnight's Children*.

The way Rushdie satirizes key Nehruvian tropes such as the nation personified, the discovery of national identity as a psychoanalytic process, the characterization of India as an essential unity within diversity, exemplifies in his text to the effective failure of the nationalist project, and at the same time to its enduring appeal. While for Nehru these are positive metaphors, making up an optimistic narrative—his faith that India will find herself, and that she will fulfill her destiny—Rushdie turns them into problematic and disturbing tropes. By making Saleem's body itself the nation, Rushdie literalizes the Nehruvian

---

<sup>42</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 35. He adds this is true of women's writing only until 1910.



metaphor of the nation as a living organism. India, Nehru says, has known the innocence of childhood, passion of youth, wisdom of maturity, etc.:

[...] and over and over again she had renewed her childhood and youth and age. The tremendous inertia of age and size have weighed her down, degrading custom and evil practice have eaten into her [...] but behind all this lie the strength of ages and the sub-conscious wisdom of an ancient race.<sup>44</sup>

Nehru also identifies with India as a living organism and its history as a living process:

Because my own personal experiences have often touched historic events and sometime I have even had something to do with the influencing of such events in my own sphere, it has not been difficult for me to envisage history as a living process with which I could identify myself to some extent.<sup>45</sup>

In *Midnight's Children* this identification of an individual life with that of a nation and its history as a "living process" is developed to a parodic—or paranoid—extent:

[...] at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps [...] thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. (MC 9)

Not unsurprisingly, in the novel it is Nehru himself who says to Saleem, in a letter at his birth, that his life "will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (MC

---

<sup>43</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *An Autobiography: or the Story of My Experiments With Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai and intr. Sunil Khilnani (1927; repr. London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 9.

238). Indeed, both narrators—Saleem and Nehru—are looking for the meaning of present-day India in the past:

Now [...] time is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning—yes, meaning—something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. (MC 9)

Both works have a tangential relation to historical writing; in both, the “plot” is very much visible, in Rushdie through his paranoid and self-conscious narrator, in Nehru through his explicitly ideological refashioning of India’s past in terms of nationalism. Both narrators feel too close to past events to write about them “dispassionately”, namely adopting the “middle style” of rhetoric that White identifies with historical writing. For Nehru,

The past remains; but I cannot write academically of past events in the manner of a historian or scholar [...] I do not possess the mood for that kind of work. The past oppresses me or fills me sometime with its warmth when it touches on the present, and becomes, as it were, an aspect of that living present [...] I can only write about it, as I have previously done, by bringing it in some relation to my present-day thoughts and activities, and then this writing of history, as Goethe once said, brings some relief from the weight and burden of the past. It is, I suppose, a process similar to that of psychoanalysis, but applied to a race or to humanity itself instead of to an individual.<sup>46</sup>

A new genre of memoir is being forged, where the “discovery”—or rather invention— of the nation is being written as a *bildungsroman*, much as *Midnight’s Children* and *A Suitable Boy* are.

In Nehru, the discovery of India’s identity is a psychoanalytic process. It reflects Nehru’s self-conscious metaphor of the nation as an individual, a

metaphor that Rushdie appropriates by parodizing it. Nehru is at pains to declare the metaphorical nature of his personification of India: "It was absurd, of course, to think of India or any country as a kind of anthropomorphic entity."<sup>47</sup> Which is precisely what Rushdie does, making this absurdity into his own brand of irony in *Midnight's Children*. In his novel, Saleem's childhood traumas become literally those of the nation, beginning from the moment of his birth where he is exchanged for someone else, to when he discovers, at the age of ten, that he is not the son of his parents.

Nehru's intentions, as he sets out to write *The Discovery of India*, consist of a search for India's past. It is, effectively, a recreation and reinvention of the past for the purposes of the present, to bring to light an Indian national consciousness. Indeed, Nehru takes on the role of the analyst, who has to strip off the layers of false consciousness and colonial domination: "The 180 years of British rule in India were just one of the unhappy interludes in her long story; she would find herself again; already the last page of this chapter was being written."<sup>48</sup> This is necessary in order to bring to light India's essential character, by adding modernity in the process:

[...] I approached her [India] almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts arose within me. Did I know India?—I who presumed to scrap much of her heritage? [...] surely India could not have been what she undoubtedly was, and could not have continued a cultured existence for thousands of years, if she had not possessed something very vital and enduring, something that was worthwhile. Where was this something?<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 37.

This is what the book endeavors to find out. India becomes the subconscious whose hidden workings must be brought to light. Nehru then continues the psychoanalytic metaphor, with himself in the role of analyst. He is on a

great voyage of discovery and the land of India and the people of India lay spread out before me. India with all her infinite charm and variety began to grow on me more and more, and yet the more I saw of her, the more I realized how very difficult it was for me or for anyone else to grasp the ideas she had embodied [....] She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. All of these existed in our conscious or subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them, and they had gone to build up the complex and mysterious personality of India [....] Though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us. The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception for me: it was an emotional experience which overpowered me. That essential unity [...]<sup>50</sup>

India's essential unity can only be recuperated if her preceding historical traumas—such as colonialism—can be worked through, which is what Nehru proceeds to do in his book, by rewriting Indian history from a nationalist perspective. The process of undigging, of “discovering” the underlying essential unity, becomes one of the objectives of this writing about India. It is a pro-active history, geared towards the future of the nation. As Rumina Sethi says, “It is in the establishment of the link between past and future that nationalism finds its sustenance.”<sup>51</sup> Nehru is hard at work to establish a common ancestry for the people of India, which can then be used to build a naturalized representation of

---

<sup>50</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 46.

a motherland. The past thus becomes a convenient tool for defining the future of the nation, the directions it will take, Nehru's "tryst with destiny".

Nehru uses the psychoanalytic metaphor for structuring his nationalist conception of Indian history. Nationalist historiography had inherited the Orientalist structuring of India's past, though it attributed a much greater centrality to the Indian agency obscured by colonial histories. British Orientalist texts of the nineteenth century, such as James Mill's *The History of British India*, divided the Indian past into periods and construed its present as a regress or decline from a golden age. According to these accounts, the golden age of Hinduism came to represent India's highest level of civilization, her "true self", comparable to Graeco-Roman antiquity. It was succeeded by a medieval period of disunity, which contributed to the Muslim political conquest of India, and brought about the present degeneration of Indian society.<sup>52</sup> Nehru is also convinced that India has departed from her past splendor and must be restored to this state, via a modernizing nationalism. For Nehru, the decay of the Indian nation is more due to inner failure than to external attack, a civilization that has "worked itself out" and has nothing more to offer the world—"its decay was evident enough even before the Turkish and Afghan invasions."<sup>53</sup> What Nehru aims at is to introduce some "essential qualitative variation of that culture"—namely to give India "the garb of modernity". So he has a double objective: one, uncover the essential nature of India, by distinguishing it from decay and external contamination, and two, fashion this nature to fit his modernizing and secularizing idea of the nation-state.

---

<sup>51</sup> Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 20.

Rushdie turns Nehru's essentializing metaphors about India upside-down, and literalizes them. Ultimately, Saleem is overwhelmed by the sheer multitude of individual voices struggling to find expression and representation—both literary and political—in the Indian “body politic” allegorized by his cracking, bursting limbs. India is not contained within the political and conceptual boundaries imposed upon her by nationhood. This is the conclusion Saleem reaches at the end of 31 years of Independence—the ultimate failure of the nationalist project, the civil war with Pakistan, the Emergency of Indira Gandhi (“the reign of the Widow”). Nehru implicitly—and at times explicitly—recognizes the mythopoetic nature of his nation-forming enterprise:

Whether there was such a thing as an Indian dream through the ages, vivid and full of life or sometimes reduced to the murmurings of troubled sleep, I do not know. Every people and every nation has some such belief or *myth of national destiny* and perhaps it is partly true in each case.<sup>54</sup>

*Midnight's Children* reiterates and expands this concept at the moment of India's birth as a modern nation:

a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything was possible... (MC 112)

---

<sup>52</sup>Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 117.

<sup>53</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 260.

<sup>54</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 42. Emphasis added.

Nehru, in the opening sections of his work, continuously stresses the “tremendous” and “obvious” diversity of India: “[...] it lies on the surface and anybody can see it [...] There is little in common, to outward seeming, between the Pathan of the North-West and the Tamil in the far South.”<sup>55</sup> He establishes a typically romantic dialectic between surface diversity and inner unity, which is not conceived in terms of “a standardization of externals or even of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.”<sup>56</sup> This dialectic between surface and interior is turned inside-out by Saleem’s self-conscious recognition that “Indians have a national longing for form”. Saleem is not denying the need of national myths— he is fully aware of the enduring power of this mass fantasy, and to a large extent he is a whole-hearted Nehruvian. Indeed, in the case of Pakistan, the narrator strongly advocates the substitution of a new myth for the old one (Islam): “liberty; equality; fraternity.”<sup>57</sup> What Rushdie has clearly taken from Nehru is the importance of the imaginative strength of this national myth, the need for it to have a strong hold on the imagination of the people in order to construct a solid nation-state.

This is the problem with Pakistan, that it was *insufficiently imagined* (which may also be why *Shame* is a much darker novel than *Midnight’s Children*):

It is possible to see the subsequent history of Pakistan as a duel between two layers of time, the obscured world forcing its way back through what-had-been-imposed. It is the true desire of every artist to impose his or her vision on the world; and Pakistan, the peeling, fragmenting palimpsest, increasingly at war with itself, may be described as a failure

---

<sup>55</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Rushdie, *Shame* (1983; repr. London: Vintage, 1995), 251.

of the dreaming mind. Perhaps the pigments used were the wrong ones [...] or perhaps the place was just *insufficiently imagined*, a picture full of irreconcilable elements [...] Urdu versus Punjabi [...] a miracle that went wrong.<sup>58</sup>

The passage contains two intertextual allusions to Nehruvian metaphors. The first is his evocation of India as a palimpsest— “She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously”. The second is Nehru’s conceptualization of national unity as “an Indian dream”:

Whether there was such a thing as an Indian dream through the ages, vivid and full of life or sometimes reduced to the murmurings of troubled sleep, I do not know. Every people and every nation has some such belief or myth of national destiny and perhaps it is partly true in each case.<sup>59</sup>

The idea of a national myth, as it is evoked by Rushdie at the moment in which India is born in the novel, is viewed as a necessary process in the construction of a nation. Rushdie’s idea of a national myth has less in common with Barthes’s idea of myth than with its opposite, revolutionary language or “political speech”. Revolutionary language *makes* the world; “it is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth.”<sup>60</sup> The myth of India as a nation is necessary as a discourse that wishes to transform reality, that has a *transitive* meaning, i.e. there is no

---

<sup>58</sup> *Shame*, 87.

<sup>59</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 42.

<sup>60</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 159.



alienation between political actors and the object of transformation, namely the “nation”. In *Midnight’s Children*, Nehru’s dream of India appeared— initially at least— very powerful in its imaginative thrust. Gradually, however, myth in this transformational sense gave way to a more absolute “mythical” (in Barthes’s sense) discourse of the nation, characterized by an increasingly monolithic and authoritarian identification between nation and state during the reign of the Widow. However, for Pakistan, as Rushdie sees it, the situation was different even in the moment of its inception; religion was the glue of Pakistan, a myth that never worked out, not even in the beginning. Right from the start, there was a sense of alienation between political actor and the “nation”.

Nehru’s conclusions about his discovery of India are characterized by a skepticism veined by a hope for the future:

The discovery of India—what have I discovered? It was presumptuous of me to imagine that I could unveil her and find out what she is today and what she was in the long past. Today she is 400 million separate individual men and women, each differing from the other, each living in a private universe of thought and feeling. If this is so in the present, how much more difficult it is to grasp that multitudinous past of innumerable successions of human beings. Yet something has bound them together and binds them still. India is a geographical and economic entity, a cultural unity amidst diversity, a bundle of contradictions held together by strong but invisible threads.<sup>61</sup>

Nehru’s doubt as to whether, as a writer, he has been able to encompass all of India’s teeming multitudes in his work, becomes a structural characteristic of the narrative voice in *Midnight’s Children*. Indeed the mythologizing drive of Nehru, who attempts to lend a naturalistic unity to that “multitudinous past of innumerable successions of human beings”, is re-deployed as a trope for

allegorizing the multifariousness and uncontainability of India. Witness the novel's last words:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust [...] it is the privilege and curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and to be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (MC 463)

#### 4.6.1. Historical events in *A Suitable Boy*: representing a riot

In clear contrast to *Midnight's Children's* allegory of history, *A Suitable Boy* chooses a different literary genre for its story, namely realism. It is an "imitation" of a foundationalist history, written from a secular nationalist perspective. Indeed it seems to correspond to a "metaphysical" idea of history that places historical events such as the Zamindari Abolition Act and the first general elections within a teleological succession. Adopting de Man's terminology for the symbol—without going so far as to say that it is a form of "tenacious self-mystification"<sup>62</sup>—one can say that his history is more symbolic, where events and the mode in which they are recounted are not separated within the representation. The symbol is transubstantial, in that it *is*, actually, what it represents—a naturalized metaphor.

Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory* explores the different ways a certain event was reconfigured within nationalist histories of India and local memories, over a period of seventy years. The book is historical, not fictional, an

---

<sup>61</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 578.

<sup>62</sup> De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality", 208.

example of how the members of the Subaltern Studies collective have developed new ways of writing history, for example by incorporating oral history—and even different languages—in their books. Amin is particularly interested in deconstructing certain aspects of the “master saga” of Indian nationalist struggles, which, according to him, are built around the retelling of certain well-known and memorable events. He is using Ricoeur’s language when he says that the significance of nationalist narratives lies in their elaborate and heroic setting down, or “figuring”, the triumph of good over evil: “The story of Indian nationalism, for instance, is written up as a massive undoing of Colonial Wrongs by a non-violent and disciplined people.”<sup>63</sup> His account addresses the event known as “Chauri Chaura”, where a group of nationalists—many of them peasants—attacked set fire to a police station, killing twenty-three policemen. For Gandhi, it was an act of “nationalist indiscipline”, and the nationalist movement generally repudiated the men who were responsible for the attack. Nationalist narratives tended to marginalize such episodes, in order to distinguish authentic popular protest from “crime”. Amin shows how, in the episode of Chauri Chaura, the historical significance attached to an event makes the facts of the case cease to matter:

Forever a lesson to be learnt, the “riot” could no longer be accorded a narrative past. It could, at most, refer to past imperfection; in the Congress as an organization, in the nationalist public more generally.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>64</sup> Amin, *Event*, 46.

The use of the term “riot” as applied to events such as these is present in Seth as well. There are several instances of popular insurgency in the book, and each are seen from the point of view of the middle class. Nationalist historians had defined subaltern rebellions as spontaneous, lacking in political consciousness, and without a clearly identifiable leadership. The Subaltern Studies historians suggested reading these counter-insurgency texts against the grain. The antagonism between the peasant rebels and the colonial authorities who were charged with containing them was clearly present in the discourse which the colonial administrators used to characterize the peasants: “The antagonism is indeed so complete and so firmly structured that from the terms stated for one it should be possible, by reversing their values, to derive the implicit terms of the other.”<sup>65</sup>

In Seth, there is a certain degree of ambivalence in the way the riots are narrated. The section dealing with the riots starts off in the following manner: “Some riots are caused, some bring themselves into being” (ASB 245). From the way he describes the two riots, they are clearly of the type that “bring themselves into being.” The spontaneous aspect of both tumults is emphasized in the narration. The first one has as its protagonists members of the jatav caste, who are shoemakers on strike. One night, a drunken brawl between some jatavs and the assistant of a trader—the people the shoemakers are striking against—“becomes” a mob, devoid of humanity, let alone political consciousness. The other riot described is communal in origin. A group of Muslims, inflamed by the sermon of the local Imam in the mosque, decide to

---

<sup>65</sup> Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 16.

storm the construction site of a nearby Hindu temple. Again, the organic, irrational element in crowd-forming is underscored: “No one knew how the men who were gathering in the narrow alleys of the Muslim neighborhood that lay on one side of Chowk became a mob” (ASB 251). The members of the crowd seem to be motivated by blind rage and are depicted as animal-like in their behavior:

A couple of the more eager members of the [Mosque] Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing—wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage. (ASB 251)

The people are no longer a “they” but an “it”, one which must be stopped at all costs. The IAS officer in charge, Krishan Dayal, is at a loss, however— “[...] despite his training in the army he had not learned to think tactically in a terrain of urban lawlessness” (ASB 252-253). Of course, what defines lawlessness is a point of view, in the case of riots. Violence is often the only way certain groups, or interests, can make themselves heard; the use of the term “lawlessness” in counter-insurgency texts can often be read against the grain, as the defiance by the people of what they had come to regard as bad laws.<sup>66</sup> Here the narrator evokes the communalist specter, and the forces of law and order, that are enjoined to defend secularism, must quell this mob which seems to be prey to a religious frenzy: “There were cries of ‘Allah-u-Akbar’ which could be heard all

---

<sup>66</sup> Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 17.

the way to the police station." Secularism is shown to have been assimilated as a creed by the policemen:

The head constable was a Muslim; it must have struck him as strange that he was about to die shooting Muslims in the course of defending a half-built Hindu temple that was an affront to the very mosque in which he himself often prayed. (ASB 253)

And yet the head constable is the one who urges Dayal, his superior, to charge and fire on the crowd in order to make them think that the policemen are much more numerous than they actually are. The ruse works: "The wild and dangerous mob, hundreds strong, faced with this sudden terror, halted, staggered, turned and fled. It was uncanny. Within thirty seconds it had melted away" (ASB 254). The crowd suddenly does not exist, leaving only some bodies behind.

And yet, in both riots, the narrator has already given enough information for the reader to doubt the "spontaneity" of the riot. Herein lies Seth's ambivalence. In the case of the communal riot, the problem stems from the fact that the Muslim mosque was built on the ruins of a Hindu temple. Hence, as Seth notes several pages before the narration of the event, "Late Mughal and British records attest to a series of Hindu-Muslim riots around this spot" (ASB 211). At the time in which the story is being told, the villainous and bestial Raja of Marh has decided to build a Hindu temple in the vicinity of the mosque. On the Friday of the riot, the Imam delivers an impassioned sermon, in which he condemns the acts of these "infidels". In mentioning the Hindus, he uses terms such as "ignorance and sin", "beastliness"; their temples are "dens of filth". And the holy men—the sadhus—are defined as "naked ash-smeared savages."

His terminology resembles the characterization of the Muslim mob as it is about to attack the Hindu temple, but with one difference. Although presented to the reader through the invisible filtering device of free indirect discourse, a technique Seth uses consistently throughout the novel, the Imam's voice is rather distanced from the point of view of the narrator; his speech, clearly aimed at inciting communal frenzy, is objectified in such a way as to "make" it sound communal. A clear hierarchy between secular, communal, and class discourses is constructed in this section. The narrator's position, in this section, is most sympathetic to the harried IAS officer, who is "forced" to shoot on an unarmed crowd because he is undermanned. Krishan Dayal represents the forces of secularism and reason; the shooting is portrayed as necessary to counteract "urban lawlessness", and is entirely the fault of the conservative Home Minister, who ordered that most of the policemen be stationed near the first mob, that of the shoemakers.

An example of secularism of the novel's "neutral" stance is the account of a religious riot between Hindus and Shia Muslims, occasioned by the coincidence of two religious days. The riot directly involves two important characters, Firoz Khan, a Muslim, and his best friend Maan Kapoor, son of the secularist Congressman Mahesh Kapoor.

"Well, there are many possibilities for riots," said Firoz. "Shias with Shias, Shias with Sunnis, Hindus with Muslims—"

"And Hindus with Hindus," added Maan.

"That's something new in Brahmpur," said Firoz.

"Well, my sister says that the jatavs tried to force themselves onto the local Ramlila Committee this year. They said that at least of the five

swaroops should be selected from among scheduled caste boys...” (ASB 1127)<sup>67</sup>

Communal conflict threatens to erupt over differing interpretations of the Ramayana: the version of Tulsidas favored by the upper-caste Hindus versus the version by Valmiki favored by the lower castes. Again, the point of view which is privileged in the text is that of a middle-class character, Kedarnath Tandon. He is said to be sympathetic to the cause of the jatavs, but he feels that including lower-caste actors in the representing of the Ramayana is “a political invasion of religion”, and can only lead to artistic disaster. Jagat Ram, the jatav who acts as the spokesman for the community, is one of the few members of the subaltern class that are represented in the novel. Significantly, he is no revolutionary. He knows that even Gandhi thought that people should continue in their hereditarily ordained professions: “... this was what most Hindus believed, and if beliefs and laws were changing, a few more generations would continue to be crushed under the wheels of the great chariot before it finally ground to a blood-stained halt” (ASB 1132). As in the case of the Zamindari Act, Seth has a progressivist and gradualistic approach to social change: no sudden revolution here, but rather a pragmatic appraisal of the dynamics of social transformations.

The staging of the Ramlila superimposes a sacred geography upon the city of Brahmpur. Rama’s capital of Ayodhya “becomes” a small square near the temple in Misri Mandi, the heart of the old city, perilously close to the Muslim area:

---

<sup>67</sup> Jatavs are a scheduled caste. A swaroop is the form assumed by a deity— in this case the protagonists of the Ramayana, Rama, Lakshman, Hanuman, Sita.



Rama had a long journey to make to the holy capital of Ayodhya—to which he was returning in triumph after many years of exile—and just as it became dark he set out on this journey from a temple situated a good half-mile from the stage where the brothers were at last to be united. (ASB 1147)

The festival of Dussehra occurs at the same time as the recurrence of Moharram, when Shia martyrs are mourned and Muslims walk in procession to display replicas of the martyrs' tombs in the Imambara. The task of the secular government is to ensure that these two conflicting sacred spaces mapped out by the two processions do not intersect at any point. Communal violence is shown to occur when two different religious calendars collide, when a period of mourning is abruptly interrupted by manifestations of joy. The moment at which violence breaks out in the text has been prepared by two sequential sections in which we are immersed completely first in the worldview of the Shia Muslim believer, and then in that of the Hindu.

Both sides were now filled with the lust to kill—what did it matter if they too suffered martyrdom?—to attack pure evil, to defend what was dear to them—what did it matter if they died?—whether to recreate the passion of Karbala or to re-establish Ram Rajya and rid the world of the murderous, cow-slaughtering, God-defiling devils. (ASB 1152)

The novel incorporates both of these sacred conceptions of time into its secular time scheme, characterized by simultaneity of action. Secular, historical time is distinguished by its tolerant incorporation of both Hindu and Muslim a-historical temporal conceptions. The third-person narrator who views the scene from the outside, represents it as a simultaneous whole, rather than fragmented into separate Hindu and Muslim identities which cannot be subsumed within a

secular idea of Indian citizenship. Again, the narrative discourse objectifies and isolates communal speech in the novel, clearly distinguishing it from the authorial speech.<sup>68</sup>

The most explicit staging of religious heteroglossia in the novel is in the State Legislative Assembly. Here, within the democratic confines of a State parliament, the different religious discourses that combine to form the character of the Indian nation are given free play, literally represented by the various political parties. The importance of the Legislative Assembly debates in the novel shows them to be a key site for the construction of the Indian nation, where often violently clashing opinions are aired, in different languages such as Urdu and Hindi. The rendering of these different languages into the English of the narrative serves to amalgamate the differing religious voices within a unifying narrative voice.

A debate in the Legislative Assembly follows the police shooting of the Muslims who were about to attack the Hindu temple construction site. Begum Abida Khan, a member of the Muslim Democratic Party, contests the fact that it was a riot. Abida Khan “had the reputation of being an aggressive protector of the rights of all Muslims in the new, truncated Independent India” (ASB 269). The Home Minister L.N. Agarwal, on the other hand, insists that it *was* a riot:

Brutally and angrily L.N. Agarwal replied:  
 “[...] If people start riots for religious reasons and attempt to destroy temples they must accept the consequences. Or mosques, of course, for that matter—”

---

<sup>68</sup> Here I identify communal speech with Bakhtin’s definition of “social language”, namely “the image assumed by a set of social beliefs, the image of a social ideologeme that has fused with its own discourse, with its own language.” Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 357.

But now Begum Abida Khan was almost shouting. "Riot? Riot? How does the honourable Minister come to the conclusion that that was the intention of the crowd? It was the time of evening prayer. They were proceeding to the mosque—"

"From all reports it was obvious. They were rushing forward violently, shouting with their accustomed zealotry, and brandishing weapons," said the Home Minister. (ASB 271)

What is being debated is the interpretation to give to such an event, and the different codifications that a "riot" receives according to the religious and/or political discourse it is appropriated by. Later on, Abida Khan tells the Home Minister "not to take refuge in semantics and deal with the facts" (ASB 372). And yet the semantics of the case—namely the interpretation of the facts—is precisely what is being debated in this political assembly.

That the Home Minister Agarwal, as a conservative Hindu member of the Congress Party, is markedly anti-Muslim, is clear from many points in this section. In talking with his wife's father-in-law, he says:

"The fact of the matter is that the country has far more important things to think about. Food is the main one [...] Mere Muslims threatening us from inside the country or across the border we can deal with. If Nehru were not so soft-hearted we would have dealt with them properly a few years ago. And now these jatavs, these"—his expression conveyed distaste at the words—"these scheduled caste people are becoming a problem once again. But let's see, let's see..." (ASB 259)

Religious and caste prejudices are shown to be so deep-rooted as to be an integral part of the way politics is conducted, regardless of the secular aegis of the Indian government in general, and of the Congress Party in particular, of which Agarwal is a prominent member.

The riot by the jatavs is portrayed with a similar ambivalence to that of the Muslim riot. As has been mentioned before, the shoemakers' protest is also

portrayed as developing spontaneously, from a drunken brawl between some jatavs and the assistant of a trader—the people the shoemakers are striking against. And yet the shoemakers' motives for going on strike and for protesting against the traders are far from spontaneous; indeed they have a solid economic basis. We hear their reasons through the voice of Kedarnath Tandon, a trader himself, whose exposition of the causes behind the strike clearly reveals the bitter antagonism between the jatavs, who are working class artisans, and the banias, the middle-class traders. The traders do not pay the shoemakers in cash for their wares, but with post-dated IOUs (known as "chits"), which the shoemakers can only discount elsewhere in order to buy raw materials:

They had felt for years that the traders were squeezing a kind of unwarranted credit out of them. Finally, when the traders, as a body, had tried to winch up the proposition of chit to cash, the shoemakers had struck.

"And of course, you're right," Kedarnath added, "the strike hurts everyone—they could starve and we could be ruined." (ASB 209)

This last phrase by Kedarnath highlights the different worst case scenarios for working class and middle class—starvation for one, ruin for the other. For Kedarnath, it is a blessing that Agarwal, the conservative Home Minister, comes from a trading community—"he does at least see our side of the matter" (ASB 209).

Agarwal, in the aftermath of the jatav riot, decides that the strikers must be punished—"something by way of a salutary example needed to be provided." Through free indirect discourse we are made privy to Agarwal's thoughts on the matter:

These jatavs had disrupted the trade of the city long enough with their frivolous complaints and their mischievous strike. They had doubtless been stirred up by union leaders [....] Many traders there were in financial straits. The threatened picketing would finish them off. L.N. Agarwal himself came from a shopkeeping family and some of the traders were good friends of his. Others supplied him with election funds [....] It was a time not for talk but for action. It was not merely a question of law, but of order, the order of society itself. Surely this is what the Iron Man of India, the late Sardar Patel, would have felt in his place. (ASB 246-247)

Agarwal denies any political agency to the jatavs themselves, thinking that they were stirred up by union leaders. The subsequent parliamentary debate about the beating up of the jatavs by the police is led by the MLA Ram Dhan, an MLA who is a member of a scheduled and therefore a defender of the cause of the jatavs:

“Is it a fact,” continued the questioner, “that on the same evening, the police beat up a large number of jatavs who were peacefully attempting to picket the Brahmpur Shoe Mart nearby?” Shri Ram Dhan was an independent MLA from the scheduled castes, and he stressed the word “jatavs”. A kind of indignant murmur rose from all around the House [....] The Home Minister stood up again.

“It is not a fact,” he stated, keeping his voice level. “The police, being hard pressed by an angry mob, defended themselves [....] As for the honourable member’s innuendo that the police singled out members of a particular caste from the mob or were especially severe because the mob consisted largely of members of that caste, I would advise him to be more just to the police... the action would have been no different had the mob been constituted differently.” (ASB 266)

Again, as in the case of Abida Khan and the Muslim riot, the scheduled-caste MLA Ram Dhan is contesting the semantics of the Home Minister, who calls the group of jatavs faced by the police a “mob”. Facts are contested, as different narratives of the event clash in the assembly chamber.

Seth's narrative supports the idea that democratic institutions are the privileged site for the negotiation of political and national identity, while at the same time implicitly endorsing Nehru's progressivist and secularizing view of the Indian state. He shows that caste and religion structure Indian politics in fundamental ways, however he indicates that the secularization of the political sphere is still incomplete. That secularization didn't triumph completely may have been due to the fact that India being a democracy, could not "impose" a secular ideology on its citizens.

#### **4.6.2. Historical events in *A Suitable Boy*: the Zamindari Abolition Act**

Nehru's idealistic and secular vision of the future nation dominated the political climate in 1950s India. In order for the novel to exemplify this faith in a secular future for India, it had to be set during Nehru's time. If it had been set in contemporary India, the narrator would have had to deal with a very different political climate, where the BJP and Hindu nationalism have taken center stage—a far cry from Nehru's idea of the Congress Party as representative of minorities and majorities alike. In this sense, then, Seth's novel recuperates Nehruvianism for the 90s, since it expresses an enduring faith in the secularism of India's political institutions such as the Legislative Assembly and the courtrooms. The representation of a communal conflict in Brahmpur is seen from the democratic and secular perspective of Nehru's letters and speeches of the early 1950s, in which he constantly lays emphasis on the importance of communal harmony. The Congress was divided on the treatment of the minorities, and the threat of a war with Pakistan raised fears of civil war in

India. The narrator's own ideological and stylistic approach often echoes Nehru's oratory on the communal issue, such as this passage:

India is a secular state. That is the very basis of our Constitution and we must understand it with all its implications. That, of course, is the only *modern* and *civilized* approach. That approach is in keeping with the whole growth of our national movement. It is not only in consonance with our ideology but with practical considerations. Any other approach would be fraught with disaster and would be a negation of all that we have stood for.<sup>69</sup>

Nehru's secularism was largely informed by his ideal of progress. For him, the resistance of Congress members to the passing of the Hindu Code Bill, was a "symbol of the conflict between reactionary and progressive forces in the social domain."<sup>70</sup> This form of progressive secularism is seen to be the sole viable solution for the establishment of an Indian democracy.

Nehru's organicist and teleological conception of the Indian nation also influences Seth's depiction of the Zamindari Abolition Act in *A Suitable Boy*. For Nehru, Congress stood not only for nationalism, but also "to a large extent", for proletarian urges for social change, as he explains in *The Discovery of India*:

In particular, it stood for revolutionary agrarian changes... This sometimes produced inner conflicts within the Congress, and the landlord class and the big industrialists, though often nationalistic, kept aloof from it for fear of social changes. Within the Congress, socialists and communists found a place and could influence Congress policy. The communal organizations, whether Hindu or Moslem, were closely associated with the feudal and conservative elements and were opposed to any revolutionary social change. The real conflict, therefore, had nothing to do with religion, though religion often masked the issue, but was essentially between those who stood for a

<sup>69</sup> Nehru, "Report to the All-India Congress Committee", 1951-1954: *Towards Freedom From Want, The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, vol. 14, ed. A.M. and S.G. Zaidi (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1981), 155. Emphasis added.

<sup>70</sup> Nehru, "Presidential Address", 1951-1954: *Towards Freedom From Want*, 35.

nationalist—democratic—socially revolutionary policy and those who were concerned with preserving the relics of the feudal régime.<sup>71</sup>

Nehru repeatedly uses the word “feudalism” to describe the landlord class, thus pointing to the underlying structure of his idea of national progress, which is that of a classic developmental narrative. “India’s growth arrested”, in *The Discovery of India*, is an exposition of Nehru’s organic developmental theory of nations: “A society, if it is to be both stable and progressive, must have a certain more or less fixed foundation of principles as well as a dynamic outlook.”<sup>72</sup> For Nehru, India’s natural growth was checked by the British, who strived to suppress the existing economy and political organization of Indians, and for this purpose to encourage and preserve the socially backward groups in their present condition (i.e. the landlords and the Indian princes). Both *A Suitable Boy* and *The Discovery of India* adopt the schema of the transition narrative in their configuration of Indian historical events.

In the novel, the Zamindari Abolition Act is portrayed as the cause of one of the most important social and economic transformations of post-Independence India, and indeed was one of the most prominent achievements of the Nehru legislation. In the narrative it symbolizes the passage from feudalism to the rise of the middle class, traditionally seen as a crucial moment of transition in the development of a modern industrialized state. The first mention of its effects of the acts is in connection with the Minister of Revenue Mahesh Kapoor, one of the prime movers behind the implementation of the Act in Purva Pradesh:

---

<sup>71</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 399.

<sup>72</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 518.



With his own eyes he had seen the lack of productivity and the consequent hunger, the absence of investment in land improvement, the worst forms of feudal arrogance and subservience, the arbitrary oppression of the weak and the miserable by the agents and musclemen of the typical landlord. (ASB 283)

Further on, we are treated to a debate in the state's house of representatives on the passing of the legislation concerning the Zamindari Abolition Act. This is, obviously, a fictional debate, and yet closely modeled on similar debates that took place in the states around that time. As part of the author's underlying democratic discourse, Seth aims to give us as wide a picture as possible, hence the reader's understanding of the problem is developed through the portrayal of the dissenting political and interest groups represented in the state parliament. Abida Khan, the sister of the Nawab Sahib and a representative of the Muslim Party, identifies the Act as a crime against an entire culture and religion. She accuses the government of approving the act because of political motivations, the imminent general elections. The Act will also leave many feudal dependents, like musicians, singers, etc., unemployed. Next we hear the representative of the Socialist Party, which holds that the government should give no compensation at all to the landlords. He then begins a rhetorical attack on the "culpable so-called generosity" of the government towards the zamindars, so much so that another member of the Legislative Assembly asks whether this is speech is in order. The Honorable Speaker (who is conducting the discussion) replies that it is. The voicing of these two extremist positions, the degree of persuasiveness of each argument, is rendered in order to show how the passing of this bill is a product of democracy, and not of a totalitarian regime. Seth, in his portrayal of

the Zamindari Act, shows how difficult it was to effect a major land reform like this one through a democratic regime and with a constitution that guaranteed “equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.”<sup>73</sup> This was the contents of Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which was used by lawyers to make their case for the dispossessed zamindars against the state, as Seth’s account shows.

The Purva Pradesh Zamindari Act is mostly seen through the eyes of its chief architect, Mahesh Kapoor. We are also shown the point of view of the medium land-holders, such as Baba, the principal zamindar of the village of Debaria. Here we also read about the worst effects of the Act, the forcible eviction of thousands of tenants from their land:

Peasants were being evicted from their homes and lands all over the country, wherever Zamindari Abolition Bills were being passed. In almost every case the intention of the zamindar was to show that the land was and always had been under his direct cultivation, and that no one other than him had any rights in it at all. (ASB 1042)

The narrator attempts to give us as complete a picture as possible of the effects of the act. Seth’s portrayal aims to convince us that the Act brought on a major societal change, through democracy and not through communism. Seth’s historical judgement on the importance of the Act coincides significantly with that of Nehru. In the report the Prime Minister submitted to the All-India Congress Committee in July 1951 (roughly contemporaneous to the events portrayed in the book), Nehru states:

---

<sup>73</sup> Article 14, *Constitution of India*, 15.

From a social point of view, the biggest achievement has been the legislation in many states for the abolition of the zamindari system. Unfortunately, this was held up by an interpretation of the Constitution in the courts and it became necessary to amend the Constitution to get over these difficulties.<sup>74</sup>

Seth presents a more historically informed view of the Act than Nehru does, from the perspective of forty years later. The Act substantially preserved “the great inequalities of the social order”. Precisely because India was a democracy, a complete and revolutionary land reform was not possible.<sup>75</sup> The electoral base of the Congress Party were the medium and small landowners, who stood most to lose from the implementation of the Act. The problem was, as one character puts it, that “land revenue isn’t a central subject— it’s a state subject.” It was in the hands of the provincial legislatures, which were ultimately unable or unwilling to operate freely.

This point emerges clearly from Seth’s text, during Mahesh Kapoor’s campaigning in Debaria, a predominantly Muslim village. Kapoor, in order to win votes, is forced to ally himself with the Nawab Sahib’s electoral candidate, thus prompting the accusations of the Socialist candidate about the collusion between the Congress and the landed classes.<sup>76</sup> One of the chief landholders of

---

<sup>74</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, “Report to the All-India Congress Committee”, July 6, 1951, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress. Vol. 14: 1951-1954: Towards Freedom From Want*, ed. by A.M. and S.G. Zaidi (Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1981), 151.

<sup>75</sup> An example of the level to which this debate was informed by ideological stances on development issues, is the negative judgement of a 1960s American economist on land reform in Uttar Pradesh. To begin with, he finds the Act “socialist”. He feels that the Act did not directly lead to a significant increase in agricultural productivity. He believes that the real problem faced by the Indian rural economy was the absence of a marketable surplus of agriculture: “[...] the tendency of the cultivator to consume all his produce is a major threat to development.” Walter C. Neale, *Economic Change in Rural India: Land Tenure and Reform in Uttar Pradesh, 1880-1955* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 249. For Neale the priority of the land reform should have been increase in agricultural productivity, rather than societal change. But Sunil Khilnani points out that for Nehru a fast growth rate was not an end in itself, and a too-rapid development might have put India’s economic independence at risk.

<sup>76</sup> For Khilnani it was precisely this mixed identity of the Congress that made it “an unbeatable political machine”. This also marked its major difference from the Chinese Communist Party: “a

the village is Baba, and Mahesh Kapoor knows he must seek an alliance with him in order to secure votes, notwithstanding Baba's methods of foiling the Act—of which Kapoor himself is the prime architect—by forced evictions. But it is clear to Mahesh Kapoor

that the man who mattered most of all was the ancient and energetic Baba. He disliked what he heard about the evictions, but he tried not to dwell on the sufferings he knew they caused. It was difficult to be someone's guest and prosecutor simultaneously, more particularly if you were hoping to seek their help in the near future. (ASB 1096)

Seth's positive judgement on the Zamindari Act ultimately rests on its being an agent of gradual social change. He communicates this to us by the progressive endorsement of this point of view from many different characters with varying interests at stake. Indeed, the Nawab Sahib himself, one of the erstwhile rulers of the region, is fatalistically resigned to the act, though it will mean the end of his world:

Well, he thought fatalistically, it has to happen sooner or later. He was under no illusions that his class was a particularly meritorious one. Those who constituted it included not only a small number of decent men but also a large number of brutes and an even larger number of idiots. He remembered a petition that the Zamindars' Association had submitted to the Governor twelve years ago: a good third of the signatories had used their thumb-prints. (ASB 305)

But these different characters are all drawn from the middle class or the aristocracy—Seth's positive assessment corresponds to a view of the land reform act *from above*. The socialist MLA's position, that the act was passed in

---

mass party with strong roots in the countryside yet given to political conservatism." Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 74-75.

order to prevent a peasant revolution, is quickly dismissed, and indeed the role of the peasantry in bringing about the anti-zamindari legislation is not even considered. The main architects of the act appear to be the Minister and his assistants.<sup>77</sup> In this sense, Seth's fictional account seems more interested in tracing the official version of the land reform, as discussed in legislative assemblies and portrayed through the minds of characters belonging to the ruling elite.

#### 4.7. Certainty and uncertainty

This chapter has examined some aspects concerning the configuration of historical events in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*. One should note the common secularizing component of their two (hi)stories of India, while allowing for great differences in their emplotment of historical occurrences. Whereas *Midnight's Children* offers a fragmented history whose key events are often discordant with a modernizing narrative of the nation-state, informed by a genealogical sense of the past, *A Suitable Boy* privileges the account of India's gradual rise to democracy within a more celebratory narrative, and without displaying any overt uneasiness with such a historicist account of India's recent past. *A Suitable Boy* projects a certainty about the future that is not shared by the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, who cannot foresee a possible future for himself,

---

<sup>77</sup> And yet peasant protest seems to have been a leading factor in the 1950s land reform, at least in the state of Bihar: "Although by the time independence had been achieved, the organized peasant movement in Bihar had split itself up into so many factions that it had lost much of its vigour, the sentiments generated and the ideas aroused by it compelled the state to try and reform the agrarian structure, lest peasant fury become uncontrollable and result in overthrowing the very institution of private property as in China." Das, "Agrarian Change", 181.

or for India, beyond a centrifugal implosion. In *A Suitable Boy*, “the ‘country’ (‘nation’) and class unity is already given, as the ideal expression of class interests and the course of history.”<sup>78</sup> By contrast, *Midnight’s Children*, though written several years earlier, does not yield any answers as to the direction the country will take after the end of the Emergency. This radical dystopianism would gain even more momentum in Rushdie’s subsequent novels about the subcontinent, *Shame* (1983) and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995).

---

<sup>78</sup> Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness”, 213.

## Chapter Five

### Languages of the Nation in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

#### 5.1. Politics and Narrative Form

In this chapter, I look at the effects arising from the interaction between English and *bhasha* languages in *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children*. I aim to show how this interaction on the one hand sets up English as a pan-Indian language which seeks to subsume, or at the very least represent, the vernaculars, but how on the other English is nativized through the contact with the *bhashas*. Hence, while the use of English serves to objectify the representation of Indian “national” culture for a transnational audience, in the process it also becomes anchored to the Indian context, and made to be the expressive vehicle for specifically national concerns. In this chapter I place my reading of the texts within the two poles of globalization and vernacularization. Rushdie’s and Seth’s use of English in these by now canonical texts exemplifies the discursive oscillation between the global and the vernacular which characterizes the language of Indian English literature. I aim to show how in *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* English functions simultaneously as a semiotic system of modernity *and* as a vernacular language.

More specifically, I contend that the linguistic mixture of the two novels projects a secular and multicultural vision of the Indian-state, which clearly reveals a Nehruvian matrix. But whereas in *Midnight's Children* the languages

are juxtaposed in a deliberately accumulative and expressionistic manner, a studied babble of idiolects relatively devoid of ideological hierarchy, in *A Suitable Boy* the different languages (also in the sense of social idioms) that make up the voices of the novel are composed into a “structured stylistic system” which reveals a more “orderly”—one could say statist—vision of the nation.

Heteroglossia, namely the dialogic interrelation of different registers and dialects that gravitate within the orbit of a national language, is in constant tension with the tendency towards linguistic centralization and unification.<sup>1</sup> In India, rather than a national language, there is a national linguistic “system”, composed of a variety of different languages. Seth’s and Rushdie’s different use of language mixture forms an integral part of their differing representations of Indian heteroglossia, and proposes differing political solutions for India’s “present needs”. Rushdie’s “Super-Sexy-High-Masala-Art” is an expression of the rebelliousness of the democratic forces rising up against the authoritarianism of the Emergency. *Midnight’s Children* celebrates the fragmentation of the polity because it signifies the pluralism of democracy as opposed to the dictatorial discourse of Indira Gandhi’s regime. Saleem represents within his often unwieldy first-person narrative many voices, many languages, many characters, struggling to contain them all until the end of the story, when he foresees his imminent disintegration into 600 million separate identities, the population of India. But this fragmentation is celebrated as a positive value for the polity, because it re-affirms the pluralism which is a vital component of democracy, a form of government which Rushdie strongly endorses. Thus heteroglossia in *Midnight’s Children* often appears Joycean,



excessive, over the top; in *Midnight's Children* are all the voices that the Emergency is trying to silence.

Seth, on the other hand, is writing in a very different political climate from the Emergency. *A Suitable Boy* is a Nehruvian epic, but in a very different sense from *Midnight's Children*. Seth's realistic, ordered narrative, which sets firm boundaries for bourgeois desire, presents a wonderfully orchestrated cast of characters whose voices are always contained within the unobtrusive presence of the third-person omniscient narrator. The realism of Seth's style is underscored by a developmental and statist idea of the nation-state. The novel endorses Nehruvian secularism as the only politically viable solution for a potentially centrifugal polity which is being increasingly undermined by Hindutva. Minorities such as Muslims and lower castes were directly threatened with exclusion from the Indian body politic. Seth's organic portrayal of an India whose minorities are a vital part of its identity and his endorsement of a strong state secularism seeks to write against the fragmentation of the polity. He reworks the multilingual reality of modern India into a monologic form, from the secular perspective of an omniscient third-person narrator.

In this chapter, I begin by analyzing the narrative voice in each of the novels. I contrast the polyphonic narrative structure of *Midnight's Children* with the monological narrative structure of *A Suitable Boy*, and interpret their different uses of language mixture accordingly. The way in which language mixture is used in the two novels ties in to the question of whether English can be seen as a pan-Indian, secular language in the Indian linguistic context, and how this status defines it in relation to vernacularization and globalization.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 272-273.

Rushdie and Seth partly draw from this already established notion of English as a pan-Indian secular language in order to create secularist and pluralist representations of India that are, however, very different from each other, as can be observed in a series of close readings from the two texts. Both novels present code-switching and code-mixing from other *bhashas*, though these processes are more frequently apparent in Rushdie than in Seth. English also functions as a language of “translation” from other Indian languages. In *Midnight’s Children*, the other language of interaction is Urdu, in *A Suitable Boy* it is Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and a “rustic dialect” spoken in the village of Debaria. GJV Prasad has perceptively outlined the analogy between Indian English texts and translations: Indian English writers are not so much translating texts from vernacular languages into English, as using various strategies to make their works read like translations.<sup>2</sup>

## 5.2. *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight’s Children*: monologic versus polyphonic

Indian English writing has been defined as a contact literature, which grows out of close proximity to Indian languages, while immersed in an Indian context.<sup>3</sup>

The artistic potential of contact literature can be theorized in Bakhtinian terms:

The unity of a literary language is not a unity of a single closed language system, but is rather a highly specific unity of several “languages” that have established contact and mutual recognition with each other.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> GJV Prasad, “Writing Translation: The Strange Case of the Indian English Novel”, *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London: Routledge, 1999), 41-57.

<sup>3</sup> Braj Kachru, *The Indianization of English: The English Language in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 295.

The syntactic and lexical exchanges that occur between English and the other Indian languages create an English with a much larger scope of expression than the Anglo-American standard, also owing to the new meanings arising from the Indian context, which this Indian English is brought to encompass. The language of Seth and Rushdie draws on more than one linguistic basis, though the way in which the *bhashas* are represented within the novels presents two very different conceptions of Indian English, one more monologic (*A Suitable Boy*) and one more heteroglot (*Midnight's Children*).

Rushdie's and Seth's different representations of India's multilingualism can be thrown into relief by contrasting Rushdie's more "polyphonic" novel with Seth's more monologic one. Bakhtin uses Dostoevsky's fiction to illustrate his ideas on the polyphonic novel, which is characterized by the coexistence and interaction of different worldviews represented by the characters, that never find a complete resolution. Like Dostoevsky's heroes, what is interesting about Saleem is the point of view he provides on India, rather than how he appears externally. As in Dostoevsky,

everything that usually serves an author in creating a fixed and stable image of the hero, "who he is", becomes in Dostoevsky the object of the hero's own introspection, the subject of his self-consciousness, and the subject of the author's visualization and representation turn to be in fact a *function* of this self-consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

In the novel, we are not given any other perspective than that the first-person narrator, except for Padma's occasional interruptions, though they are also

---

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 48.

mediated through Saleem's voice. But we gradually become very wary of his narrative guidance given the singular mistakes and interpretations he provides in his "chutnification" of Indian history. All of the other characters interact with Saleem's consciousness in the sense that we are never given any "objective" picture of them, but only as it is filtered through his consciousness. Amina Sinai is emotionally evoked by Saleem as a good, loving mother and as a solicitous yet unfaithful wife; we get a sense of her character through recurring, almost obsessive images, such as that of the "black mango" of her rump that Saleem accidentally sees as a child when he is hiding in the washing-chest. As Bakhtin says of Dostoevsky's characters, whenever someone else's "truth" is presented in the novel, "it is introduced without fail into the *dialogic field of vision* of all the major heroes of the novel."<sup>6</sup> There is no essential "surplus of meaning", as Bakhtin says, that is retained by the author above and outside Saleem's consciousness, for if that were the case, then we would not have the representation of a character's self-consciousness, but rather the external perspective of an author on a "finalized" image of the character. Even the past, the time before Saleem is born, is drawn into a dialogue, is seen through his circle of Angle-poised light, as he self-consciously tells us, pre-empting the question of how he can be so omniscient as to know what was going on before his birth, during his grandfather's time. The various people Saleem meets interact and engage with Saleem's consciousness, and assume a *dialogic identity*, as in the case of his friends Parvati the Witch and Picture Singh.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin's comments on the consciousness of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* are relevant to this reading of *Midnight's Children*: "In the subsequent course of the novel, nothing incorporated into its content—people, ideas, things—remains external to Raskolnikov's consciousness; everything is projected against him and dialogically reflected in him [...] the

A characteristic of the polyphonic novel such as Dostoevsky's is a speech style defined by the intense anticipation of another's words. In *Midnight's Children*, as in Dostoevsky,

the heroes' most important confessional self-utterances are permeated with an intense sensitivity towards the anticipated words of others about them, and with others' reactions to their own words about themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Bakhtin calls this the "sidelong glance". Saleem is constantly anticipating the reactions of the reader, an interlocutor who is embedded in his speech, namely his companion Padma:

... I must interrupt myself. I wasn't going to today, because Padma has started getting irritated whenever my narration becomes self-conscious, whenever, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings; but I simply must register a protest. (MC 65)

Here the polyphonic novel displays an interaction between worldviews and different utterances that are never internally resolved, but coexist within the author's artistic vision.

In Dostoevsky's thinking, according to Bakhtin, "there are no genetic or causal categories", in the sense that characters' actions are not explained on the basis of the past, on the influence of upbringing or the environment. Saleem is

---

author retains for himself no essential 'surplus' of meaning and enters on an equal footing with Raskolnikov into the great dialogue of the novel as a whole." Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 75. The exclusive centrality given to the hero's consciousness in Rushdie further heightens Saleem's paranoid tendencies. Everything in India's history is telescoped into Saleem's consciousness. Indeed Rushdie's other novels, like *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* have a similar totalizing narrative voice that coincides with one of the characters. *Shame*, however, which in other respects can be seen as a correlated novel to *Midnight's Children*, has a clearly perceptible authorial persona as the narrator, and is a much more monologic narrative than his previous novel.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 205.

similarly constructed, as a character whose actions have few causal links between them. Saleem heightens this effect in the reader's mind by emphasizing how he is someone to whom things happen to, by almost random chance. When he becomes a soldier in the Pakistani Army, he has no memory at all of his previous identity, and the narrative shifts to the third person. It is as if the Buddha figure who is used by officials to sniff out dangers were a different character altogether from the young Saleem Sinai; and both are previous "temporal identities" of the narrator who is recounting all this while situated in the present of the narrative. *Midnight's Children's* polyphonic structure is markedly different from the narrative voice of *A Suitable Boy*, characterized by a more monologic style. It might seem contradictory to define Seth's style as monologic, given the diversity and variety of Indian life portrayed in the novel. However the use of heterogeneous material does not necessarily lead to a polyphonic novel:

A novel such as *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, for example, unites material of the most heterogeneous content, but this heterogeneity does not function in the structure of the novel itself and cannot so function in any well-defined way—because it is subordinated to the unity of personal style and tone permeating it through and through, the unity of a single word and a single consciousness. The unity of a Dostoevskian novel, however, is *above* personal style and personal tone [...] If viewed from a monologic understanding of the unity of style, Dostoevsky's novel is *multi-styled* or styleless; if viewed from a monologic understanding of tone, Dostoevsky's novel is *multi-accented* and contradictory in its values; contradictory accents clash in every word of its creations.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed Seth's novel has a very wide range of heterogeneous narrative material, and yet the narrator arranges an ideological hierarchy of all the different

---

<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 15.

languages of the novel in such a way as to privilege a monological tone. The use of *bhasha* words in the text does not enter into a carnivalesque collision with the English. However, Seth Indianizes the English in more subtle ways, which are not as immediately apparent as Rushdie's pyrotechnic linguistic experimentalism.

### 5.3. Vernacularizing English

The idea of hybridizing English in order to fashion it as a pan-Indian literary language took the form of a programmatic nationalist statement in Raja Rao's preface to *Kanthapura* (1938). The novel, written in English, traced the coming of Gandhism and the nationalist movement to a small village on the Malabar coast:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word "alien", yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.<sup>10</sup>

*Kanthapura* appears interesting for "the manner in which the experimental use of the English language is geared towards the definition of a cultural identity."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Raja Rao, Foreword, *Kanthapura*, v.

<sup>11</sup> Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, 40-41. Sethi observes that the foreword is not merely a literary manifesto, but also a nationalist one, since the "we" as referred to Indians was still highly problematic in 1938. To consider oneself "Indian" in 1938, rather than Karnatakan, Punjabi, Kashmiri, or even Brahmin or Muslim, denoted a committed nationalist.

Rao's manifesto established hybridity and language mixture, and most importantly, bilingualism, as key features of Indian English as a literary language. A defining characteristic of English as it was used to narrate an Indian context had always been linguistic experimentation and innovation.<sup>12</sup> Anita Desai remarked that Rushdie's use of language marked a revolution in the relationship of Indian writers with English:

[...] in the 40s and 50s and 60s too when I began publishing, we were all still trying to write an official, formal English. And we were all perfectly aware that this was not the language spoken around us, that our models were still literary models. We were using English literary models for our own writings. And I don't think it happened until the 80s, till Salman Rushdie came along that Indian writers finally felt capable of using the spoken language, spoken English, the way it's spoken on Indian streets by ordinary people.<sup>13</sup>

In one sense, Rushdie's "verbal play, internal rhyme, and strange verbal conjoinings characterize the linguistic practices of postmodernism."<sup>14</sup> But for Rushdie, his restructuring of the English sentence in *Midnight's Children* is not only postmodernist, it is also a way of letting Indian speech patterns into the English:

*Midnight's Children* was partially conceived as an opportunity to break away from the manner in which India had been written about in English, not just by Indian writers but by Western writers as well.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Among the early practitioners of English creative writing in India was the writer Krupabai Satthianadhan, who incorporated Indian words into her novels without providing a glossary. See Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Kamala, the Story of a Hindu Life* (1894; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> "An Interview with Anita Desai", *World Literature Written in English* 30:1 (1990), 50. For a discussion of language in Indian English writing of the 80s and 90s, see Jon Mee, "After Midnight: The Novel in the 1980s and 1990s", *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 318-336.

<sup>14</sup> Juliette Myers, "Postmodernism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*", *Manuscript* 1:2 (Spring 1996), n.pag., online, 8 Oct. 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Rushdie, interview, *Kunapipi* 4:2 (1982), 19.



Language emerges as one of the key concerns for Rushdie in writing *Midnight's Children*. He acknowledges the important influence G.V. Desani's novel *All About H. Hatterr* had on his language, and how it served as a linguistic model for transforming his English:

The way in which the English language is used in that book is very striking; it showed me that it was possible to break up the language and put it back together in a different way [...] one thing it showed me was the importance of punctuating badly. In order to allow different kinds of speech rhythms or different kinds of linguistic rhythms to occur in the book, I found I had to punctuate it in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language; I had to use dashes too much, keep exclaiming, putting in three dots, sometimes three dots followed by semi-colons followed by three dashes... That sort of thing just seemed to help to dislocate the English and let other things into it.<sup>16</sup>

A sample of Desani's prose shows some similarities to Rushdie in the use of punctuation and parenthetical clauses:

All pelmanism and former McCoy forsook him. Thus humbled, this once Apostle of Enthusiasm refrained from self-pity, and *acted*. He gave up digging for good; and—fall of man!—he climbed down; evolved *backwards*. From the high station of a seeker of wisdom and learning, he went below; to the lowest bottom-rung of the human progress-ladder. He decided to become a writer!—belong to the frisky fraternity of autobiography-makers, the fellers who keep a tally of their does, and in the sunset of their days, make an oyez to humanity, asserting the motto, *Everyman, I will be thy guide!*—Damme, clowning and vaudeville-turning!<sup>17</sup>

The rhythm of the language is similar to Rushdie's: the ironic, playful rhetorical tone, filled with redundant adjectives and attributes. Rushdie's

---

<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, interview, 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> G.V. Desani, *All About H. Hatterr* (1948; rev. ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 31.

vernacularization of English serves to assimilate it into an Indian context, to make it into an Indian language. This vernacularization of English is at work in Seth as well, though in a less visible manner. Making English into an Indian language is essential for lending verisimilitude to Seth's and Rushdie's narratives of India. An important part of their achievement as novelists is showing to what extent English can be made into an expressive medium for chronicling contemporary India. The question is: why does the transformation of language in the direction of vernacularization appear so necessary to both writers for the novels they are writing about India? As Amit Chaudhuri says,

to say that English is now an Indian language—while that may be true—requires all kinds of qualifications and a careful re-examination of that claim; for English is not an Indian language in the way it is an American language; nor is it an Indian language in the way that Bengali or Urdu, for instance, is one.<sup>18</sup>

#### **5.4. English as a semiotic system of modernity**

English came to be identified with modernity and nation-building after Indian Independence. Contrary to the received opinion that English became the linguistic vehicle of modernity in the colonial period, Chaudhuri claims that it was the rise of the vernacular which was the vehicle of modernity for the rising Indian middle classes. The creation of the first modern Indian literature in Bengali, for example, was directly related to the fact that Bengali had become the principal medium of expression of the educated Bengali middle classes.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Chaudhuri, "Modernity and the Vernacular", xxii.

<sup>19</sup> The novel in the vernacular languages became the genre in which "the ordinary affairs of modern life" were narrated for an Indian public at the turn of the nineteenth century. O. Chandu

The vernaculars, Chaudhuri claims, “which were, in truth, paradigms of a new consciousness—emerged from a feudal-religious world into a secular one.” The emergence of so many vernacular literatures serves as an emblem for the increased embourgeoisement of India in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of Independence there was no agreement on what was to be the national language. The debate was divided between Hindi extremists and moderates; and both sides conceded “the idea of having a single language being a precondition of firm, unassailable nationalism”, an idea which revealed the profound influence of European nationalist precedents on the Indian intelligentsia.<sup>21</sup> Though the Nehru government encouraged the adoption of Hindi as a national language, what *de facto* became the language of India’s nation-building in the years after Independence was English.<sup>22</sup> English became the language of the secular elite, and in time came to be identified with a secular subject-position. The English language of *A Suitable Boy*, for example, by aspiring to a pan-Indian representativeness which transcends religious, cultural and linguistic differences, finds its truest voice in the third-person omniscient narrator who projects a “superior” secular perspective on communal and other “non-modern” conflicts.

---

Menon’s novel in Malayalam, *Indulekha* (1889), one of the first Indian novels, was written precisely with this intent. See Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Introduction, *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Chaudhuri, “Modernity and the Vernacular”, xxi.

<sup>21</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, “Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India”, *Nationalstaat und Sprachkonflikt in Süd und Südostasien*, ed. Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart, 1992), 54.

<sup>22</sup> Kaviraj remarks that the pragmatic adoption of English as the language of nation-building had much to do with the developmental and scientific emphasis of Nehruvian state policy; such emphasis inevitably privileged English as the language of communication among the high bureaucracy, without the impediments of translation between vernacular languages. See Kaviraj, “Writing”, 55.

English has assumed an increasingly hegemonic role in Indian public life after Independence:

In the public sphere the elite has used English—obviously English here is more than simply a language; it is also a juridical/legal apparatus, also a political idiom, in short, a semiotic system signifying modernity, etc.—to impose its secular categories on the social world.<sup>23</sup>

Caste and religious idioms, when articulated in English, had to be approached at one remove, as it were, as an “experience-distant concept”. In some sense, secular discourse could best be articulated through English because it acted as a “meta-language” vis-à-vis caste and tradition. The English language of *A Suitable Boy* similarly acts as a secularizing, and occasionally homogenizing medium for the heterogeneous religious and cultural traditions which are represented within it.<sup>24</sup> The novel’s linguistic uniformity manages to convey a sense of representational transparency which makes it an extremely supple fictional medium, able to encompass lengthy political debates, Urdu poetry, and comic dialogue without losing narrative momentum. Seth’s style performs the ideological function of conveying a classically Nehruvian idea of India premised on “unity within variety”.

### 5.5.1. The narrator as translator

---

<sup>23</sup> Vivek Dhareshwar, “Caste and the Secular Self”, *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (December 1993), 117-118.

<sup>24</sup> In a monologic novel such as Seth’s, or Tolstoy’s (the example that Bakhtin makes), “whatever discourse-types are introduced by the author-monologist, whatever their compositional distribution, the author’s intentions and evaluations must dominate over the others and must form a compact and unambiguous whole. Any intensification of others’ intonations in a certain discourse or a certain section of the work is only a game, which the author permits so that his own direct or refracted word might ring out all the more energetically. Every struggle between two voices within a single discourse for possession or dominance in that discourse is decided in

In both novels, English assumes the role of a pan-Indian language—the opposite of localized—in order to provide a pan-Indian representation. The concept of translation serves as a useful metaphor for its transformation into a vernacular, national, and global language at the same time. On the one hand, in fact, the narrative voices in both novels effect a “translation” from Indian languages into English so as to represent the multi-lingual complexity of the Indian nation-state within an overarching (though not perhaps unifying) narrative discourse. The heteroglossia of the nation is “translated” into a monolingual medium (though characterized to a greater or lesser extent by language mixture) aspiring to a pan-Indian representativeness. On the other hand, the narrators are vernacularizing English by presenting it as a medium of translation from other Indian languages.

In the novels, many different Indian languages circulate in the dialogues, or in the free indirect discourse of characters who do not speak English as their first language. Rushdie and Seth, in different ways, radicalize Bakhtinian heteroglossia as a model for conceiving national language, by transposing into their English the multi-lingual nature of the Indian nation-state, whose unity, unlike the majority of the European nations, was not conceived on the basis of a common national language (the Constitution lists eighteen official languages of the Indian Union).<sup>25</sup>

The contrast between the carnivalesque proliferation of idioms in *Midnight's Children* and the more monologic prose of *A Suitable Boy* comes out in

---

advance, it only appears to be a struggle; all fully signifying authorial interpretations are sooner or later gathered together in a single voice.” Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 204.

their different methods of “translation”. What we are calling translation here is, of course, not a translation at all, in the sense that the dialogues and free indirect speeches in other Indian languages which are rendered in English, or Indian English in the text, are renditions of an “original” which does not exist. The idea of Indian English writing is based on the analogy described by Maria Tymoczko:

The culture or tradition of a post-colonial writer acts as a metatext which is rewritten—explicitly and implicitly, as both background and foreground—in the act of literary creation. The task of the interlingual translator has much in common with the task of the post-colonial writer; where one has a text, however, the other has the metatext of culture itself.<sup>26</sup>

Rushdie himself likens the condition of the postcolonial writer to that of a translator, in his famous definition of British Indian writers as “translated men”, who are “borne across across the world”, and act as mediators between cultures.<sup>27</sup> The most significant devices by which English is Indianized in the two novels are, in varying degrees, code-mixing, hybridization, and transfer of context. Transfer of context, a term coined by the linguist Braj Kachru,

involves transfer of those cultural patterns which are absent or different in those cultures where English is used as a first language. For instance, in Indian English fiction, the following cultural patterns, which repeatedly occur in typically Indian plots, come under such transfer: the caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions of superiority and inferiority.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Eighth Schedule [Articles 344(1) and 351], *Constitution of India*, 338.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Tymoczko, “Postcolonial Writing and Literary Translation”, *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 17. Note Rushdie’s gendering of the migrant writer.

<sup>28</sup> Kachru, *The Indianization of English*, 131.

Transfer of context is typical of contact literatures. An example of transfer of context would be the idea of “a suitable boy”. The title of the novel is given by the search on the part of Mrs Rupa Mehra for “a suitable boy” for her daughter Lata, which for her means a “good, decent, cultured, khatri boy”. It is taken for granted that her daughter must get married, and to someone from her own community. All of these cultural factors, which include the Indian mother’s typical and pervasive anxiety that her daughter will go unwed, combine to transform the meaning of the word “suitable” into something rather different from the way in which it would be used in a culture where English is the first language. Code-switching and code mixing occur in a situation where there is language contact, and the alternation of codes “is determined by the function, the situation, and the participants.”<sup>29</sup> Code-mixing consists of the presence of Hindi-Urdu words in the dialogues and/or the narrative voice. Kachru notes how in Indian creative writing there is a long tradition of *bhasha sankar* (language mixture), especially in poetry, for various types of effects. Hybridization, a sub-category of code-mixing, entails the use of at least one item of English and one from a native language, as for example the word “jailkhana” used by a character in *Midnight’s Children*: ““Oh my God my hour has come, my darling Madam, only let me go peacefully, do not put me in the jailkhana!”” (MC 279)

### 5.5.2. Expressionistic and symbolic translations

---

<sup>29</sup> Kachru, *The Indianization of English*, 193.

Generally speaking, the translated dialogues of *Midnight's Children* privilege what I shall call an expressionistic rendering of the *bhashas* in such a way as to make them virtually undistinguishable from Indian English.<sup>30</sup> Rushdie's language is characterized by much code-mixing, and generally aims toward a comic effect. There is a strong contrast between the dialogues, which are in Indian English, and the language of the narrator, which is in an English much closer to the British standard. The translations from Indian languages of *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, display what I shall call a symbolic use of the vernacular, with little or no code-mixing: in the sense that English, in some instances, becomes a *symbolic* Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, etc.

In what sense can it be said that Seth's is a symbolic translation, whereas Rushdie's is expressionistic? Here is an example of how Seth renders the ornate Urdu speech of the Muslim courtesan and musician Saeeda Bai, who is gently reproaching her lover Maan for not visiting her:

"Rumour has it, Dagh Sahib, that you have been in town for some days now. Twirling, no doubt, that handsome ivory-headed cane. But the hyacinth that obtained favour yesterday appears withered today to the connoisseur."

"Begum Sahiba—" protested Maan.

"Even if she has withered away only for lack of the water of life," continued Saeeda Bai [...] (ASB 871)

The English of this passage functions as a symbolic Urdu; in order to foreground the purity of the language, Seth chooses an elevated register of

---

<sup>30</sup> Here the term "expressionistic" defines a usage that allows for subjectivity to take precedence over any formal adherence to a "realistic", or more standard, use of language. Expressionism is defined as "an artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse in him. He accomplishes his aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring,



English. Code-mixing with Urdu, and other linguistic hybridization does not occur in the passage, because it is not felt to be a sufficiently representative translation of the elegance of “chaste” Urdu. The author fashions a symbolic, rather than material equivalent to the Urdu out of an elevated register of English. The symbolic use of the “official” language to represent the vernacular is a procedure which many contact literatures (like Anglophone African writing) have in common:

[...] the Igbo villagers of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* speak an elegant English virtually unmixed with Igbo forms, except for the occasional use of concepts for which no forms exist in English.<sup>31</sup>

Rushdie’s translated Urdu, on the other hand, aims to reproduce at least partly some of the syntactical structures, lexical items, and tone of the source language, in order to express the earthiness of the Hindi-Urdu spoken by some of his characters. When Parvati-the-Witch, Saleem’s future wife, first meets Saleem in person (previously they had only conversed telepathically), she exclaims happily:

“Arre’ baap, Saleem, you remember—the children, yaar, O this is too good! So why are you looking so serious when I feel like to hug you to pieces? So many years I only saw you inside here,” she taps her forehead, “and now you’re here at last with a face like a fish. Hey, Saleem! Say one hullo at least.” (MC 379)

---

violent, or dynamic application of formal elements.” See “Expressionism”, *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2003), *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, n.pag., 25 Aug., 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Sharon Masingale Bell, “In the Shadow of the Father-Tongue: On Translating the Masks in J.-S. Alexis”, *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, ed. Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 72.

This different rendering of *bhashas* in the two authors expresses different attitudes to the conception of the body politic in these two writers. It is not so much that Rushdie is allowing the vernaculars to roam unchecked within his text, while Seth is keeping them under tight control. Indeed Rushdie often provides the translations of Hindi-Urdu words next to the original in the text (though not always).<sup>32</sup> Seth, on the other hand, deliberately does not provide a glossary or translations of Hindi, Urdu or Bengali words. Even so, the images of national Indian heteroglossia that Seth and Rushdie create differ radically. Rushdie celebrates the uncontainable, almost anarchic multiplicity of voices and languages that take over the voice of the narrator, whose body politic struggles to govern them. But India continuously strains at the seams; and imposing Emergencies is of no use, the voices make themselves heard anyway. On the other hand, the orderly containment of vernaculars within a symbolic use of translation in Seth's text is a function of a much more statist idea of the nation; clearly not the statism of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, but rather the statism of Nehru. Seth's English is not less innovative than Rushdie's, though it is less visibly characterized by linguistic virtuosity. It subverts standard English in subtle ways, often turning common figures of speech into comic and suggestive images. Biswas Babu, an old clerk who works for the Chatterji family, gives involuntary, and therefore amusing, new twists to English idiomatic expressions, while earnestly trying to convince the young poet Amit Chatterji to get married:

---

<sup>32</sup> See Trivedi, "Salman the Funtoosh: Magic Bilingualism in *Midnight's Children*", *Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, 69-94.

“But you are probably making hail while the sun shines, and sowing oats. That is why I have come”, [said Biswas Babu].  
 “Sowing oats?” Amit was puzzled.  
 “But Meenakshi has rolled the ball, now you must follow it.”  
 It suddenly struck Amit that Biswas Babu was talking [...] about marriage. (ASB 451)

Biswas Babu’s unconsciously creative reformulations of metaphor are examples of the possible metamorphoses that English undergoes in native utterance. For the Chatterjis, Biswas Babu’s English is “a thing of tortuous beauty”, alive with expressive possibilities (ASB 514). Both Seth’s privileging of symbolic representation of the vernacular and Rushdie’s code-mixed and slangy Indian English, are highly stylized renderings of Indian heteroglossia, both Rushdie’s masala English and Seth’s more monologic language.

### 5.5.3. Symbolic translation in *A Suitable Boy*

Seth’s symbolic translation of Urdu has a similar function to the transfer of context, indeed in many cases cultural and linguistic translation are virtually indistinguishable.<sup>33</sup> His rendering of a ghazal performance by the courtesan Saeeda Bai is a masterpiece of translation in every sense of the word. A kind of confirmation of Seth’s skills as a translator (which are undoubted, as he has published a translation of three classical Chinese poets) is Trivedi’s praise of the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy*, which he calls a “recovery” of the text: “The night-long *mehfils* of ghazal-singing and witty repartee in verse featuring Saeeda

---

<sup>33</sup> Transfer of context as defined by Braj Kachru “involves transfer of those cultural patterns which are absent or different in those cultures where English is used as a first language”. Kachru, *The Indianization of English*, 193.

Bai are rendered incomparably more delectable for being made available now in the very Urdu of Mir and Dagh."<sup>34</sup>

Both novels foreground the issue of the "ethnocentric" text/translation versus the "foreignizing" or "ethnodeviant" text/translation. In the ethnocentric version, a translation focuses on bringing the author to the audience—translating will consist of a familiarizing process. Maria Tymoczko refers to this type of translation as "an assimilative presentation in which likeness or 'universality' is stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work."<sup>35</sup> In the foreignizing or ethnodeviant approach, on the other hand, the translator deliberately foregrounds unfamiliar cultural elements or leaves some lexical items untranslated, in the effort to bring the audience towards the text, rather than the opposite:

modes of translating the "other" that allow "alien" languages (and ways of life) to interrogate, even radically disrupt the language (and way of life) that the self inhabits by virtue of being embedded in it."<sup>36</sup>

Whether a translation can be said to be ethnocentric or ethnodeviant is largely determined by the provenance of its audience.

Seth's rendering of the ghazal performance tends to be more ethnodeviant than ethnocentric. A reader unfamiliar with the world of Urdu poetry and ghazals will get a mere tantalizing glimpse, without a complete and exhaustive "translation" of this type of performance, which has both a romantic and a

---

<sup>34</sup> Trivedi, "Translation as Recovery: *A Suitable Boy* as *Koi Achcha-sa Ladaka*", *The Book Review* 22:9 (September 1998), 30.

<sup>35</sup> Tymoczko, "Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation", 21.

mystic tradition. As in *A Suitable Boy*, the romantic ghazal was sung by courtesans at the courts of the Nawabs, though in this scene of the novel Saeeda Bai is performing at the house of a noted Hindu politician, Mahesh Kapoor. A characteristic of the ghazal performance is that there is “no stage, no microphone, no visible separation of the singer’s area from the audience” (ASB 85). The ghazal performance is represented as a joint creation in which performer and audience interact, the audience usually knows the pieces of poetry which have been turned to music, and the more cultured the audience and the performer, the more sophisticated is the performance:

“What will you listen to next, Maheshji?” Saeeda Bai asked [Maan’s] father. “What a grand audience you always provide at your house. And so knowledgeable I sometimes feel myself redundant. I need only sing two words and you gentlemen complete the rest of the ghazal.” (ASB 91)

There are moments of straightforward translation in the scene, as when Seth translates Urdu couplets from Mir and Ghalib, even making them rhyme:

“After a wakeful night outside that lane,  
The breeze of morning stirs the scented air.

Interpretation’s Gate is closed and barred  
But I go through and neither know nor care.” (ASB 90)

In this style of singing, “where song was made a personal statement”, each person of the audience, and Maan Kapoor in particular, can feel the lyrics, whose meaning is intensified by the music, as addressed to him or her personally. In this description of a ghazal performance, there are multiple

---

<sup>36</sup> Anuradha Dingwaney, “Introduction: Translating ‘Third World’ Cultures”, *Between Languages*

translations at work: linguistic, inter-semiotic (from one artistic code, music, to another, the language of novelistic prose), and cultural. Seth does not explain to us what a ghazal is, he narrates it:

This is because the word does not have some essential meaning which is unique to [Indian culture] and experientially inaccessible to members of another culture; the meaning of the word is that composite of uses which emerges in any reading.<sup>37</sup>

There are moments when the writing is more “ethnodeviant”, as when Saeeda Bai directs her couplets to a shy young boy in the audience, who blushes and bites his lips at her words:

“Your red lips are full of nectar.  
How rightly you have been named Amrit Lal!” (ASB 92)

The pun is of course incomprehensible for those who don’t know that in Hindi “amrit” means nectar and “lal” means red; here the defamiliarizing approach is at work to at least a portion of the novel’s implied readers.

But what makes a novel like *A Suitable Boy* so interesting, and at the same time so difficult to “read” analytically, is that the different Bakhtinian “languages” of the novel produce both ethnocentric and ethnodeviant forms of English. At times, the English-speaking reader will immediately tune into the language being spoken, as in the case of the self-conscious verbal play of the Mehra and the Chatterjis, the two families who generally speak directly in English—in their case there is no “translation” on the part of the narrator. The different varieties of English present in the novel induce a constant reflection on

language, as well as the many instances where the characters themselves discuss knowledge and command of English, which in India is a marker of social status, especially in middle-class society:

"One feels so bewildered among all these millions of books," said Lata, astonished that several hundred yards of a city could actually be given over to nothing but books—books on the pavement, books on makeshift bookshelves out in the street, books in the library and in Presidency College, first-, second-, third- and tenth-hand books, everything from technical monographs on electroplating to the latest Agatha Christie.

"I feel so bewildered among these millions of books, you mean."

"No, I do," said Lata.

"What I meant," said Amit, "was 'I' as opposed to 'one'. If you meant the general 'one', that would be fine. But you meant 'I'. Far too many people say 'one' when they mean 'I'. I found them doing it all the time in England, and it'll survive here long after they've given up that idiocy."

Lata reddened but said nothing. Bish, she recalled, referred to himself exclusively and incessantly as "one".

"It's like 'thrice'", said Amit.

"I see," said Lata.

"Just imagine if I were to say to you: 'One loves you'", Amit went on. "Or worse still, 'one loves one.' Doesn't that sound idiotic?"

"Yes," Lata admitted with a frown. She felt he was sounding a bit too professional. And the word "love" reminded her unnecessarily of Kabir.

"That's all I meant," said Amit.

"I see," said Lata. "Or rather, one sees."

"I see one does," said Amit. (ASB 524)

The metalinguistic humor of this passage is in marked contrast with the narrator's rendition of Indian English, whose comic effect is entirely dependent on the reader recognizing the typical structures of Indian English being parodied here. Pran Kapoor, a lecturer in English literature, is being massaged by the "magical masseur" Maggu Gopal. Though Pran speaks Hindi, Gopal

---

<sup>37</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), 43.

insists on speaking English with him (probably to give himself more social status in Pran's eyes):

"This til oil is very good—it has the warming properties. I have rich clients also—many Marwaris of Calcutta know me. They are not taking care of bodies. But I say the body is like finest vintage car, of which there are no spare parts available in the market. Therefore it needs service and maintenance from competent engineer, namely"—and here he pointed to himself—"Maggu Gopal. And you should not care about expense. Would you give your Swiss watch to the incompetent watchman because he charged cheaply? Some people sometimes call servants, like Ramu or Shamu, to do their massage. They think it is in the oil only." (ASB 863)

Seth's subtly parodic and metalinguistic subversion of standard English provides an interesting stylistic contrast with Rushdie's form of vernacularization. The language of *Midnight's Children* allows Indian English to take centre stage, by dramatizing and highlighting each character's idiosyncratic Indianisms.

#### 5.5.4. *Midnight's Children's* expressionistic translations

The Indian English of *Midnight's Children* displays some similar formations to that of *A Suitable Boy*, though Rushdie uses it much more frequently in his dialogues. Seth's seamless rendering of Urdu is in striking contrast with Rushdie's deliberately "dirty", namely code-mixed, translations. These "translations" can be called expressionistic in the sense that they are pervaded by the earthiness of street Hindi. Within the language of the narrator Saleem Sinai, English takes on a very wide spectrum of registers, from the peculiar, slightly deranged linguistic idiosyncrasies of Saleem's narrative style, to



translations of dialogues from Indian languages, to examples of Indian English as a spoken language, namely the slangy code-mixed variety used by the Anglicized middle-class of 1950s Bombay. It is important to note that Rushdie's "translations" from Hindi, Urdu, and other *bhashas* come across as Indian English, as in the case of the slangy Hindi spoken by the artistes of the magicians' ghetto. This English "translation" of a Hindi-Urdu original which does not exist includes deviations from native varieties of English—for example the writer will omit the article, translate figures of speech literally, put "only" at the end of the sentence, use the present continuous instead of the simple present (all Indianisms). See, for example, how he translates the Urdu of the boatman Tai:

"What can be said, sir?" Tai mumbled meekly. "I am honoured indeed to be summoned into the home of a so-great personage as yourself. Sir, the lady hired me for a trip to the Mughal Gardens, to do it before the lake freezes. A quiet lady, Doctor Sahib, not one word out of her all the time. So I was thinking my own unworthy private thoughts as old fools will and suddenly when I look she is not in her seat. Sahib, on my wife's head I swear it, it is not possible to see over the back of the seat, how was I to tell? Believe a poor old boatman who was your friend when you were young... [...]" "I, Sahib?" Tai shocked, malodorous, innocent. "But grief is making your head play trick! How can I know these things?" (MC 30)

Here the Indianisms, or rather Urduisms, include the rather formal sentence "I am honored indeed to be summoned into the home of a so-great personage as yourself." A typically Hindi-Urdu formation is "so-great" = "itna barha". There is also the literal translation of an oath, "on my wife's head I swear it", and the omission of the article in "grief is making your head play trick". The latter formation is influenced by Hindi-Urdu, which has no articles.

*Midnight's Children* can be ordered in a chronological sequence according to the different languages predominantly spoken by the characters: first Urdu, then English. The language is rarely stated explicitly, but must be deduced from the social and geographical context. For example in the magicians' ghetto, a Muslim settlement near the Jama Masjid in Delhi, it is highly probable that Urdu is being spoken.

At the beginning of the story we have Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, who lives in Kashmir, and, presumably, speaks Urdu or Persianized Kashmiri with his family and the boatman Tai. Tai's speech contains examples of code-mixing with Urdu, which is a way to foreground the vernacular element. Here Tai, who is reputedly as old as the hills, tells Aadam of his meeting with the aged Isa (Jesus Christ) when, according to legend, he came to the Kashmir valley:

"Nakkoo, listen, listen. I have seen plenty. Yara, you should've seen that Isa when he came, beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head. He was old and fagged-out but he knew his manners. 'You first,' Taiji, he'd say, and 'Please to sit'; always a respectful tongue, he never called me crackpot, never called me *tu* either, always *aap*. Polite, see? And what an appetite! Such a hunger, I would catch my ears in fright. Saint or devil, I swear he could eat a whole kid in one go. I told him, eat, fill your hole, a man comes to Kashmir to enjoy life, or to end it, or both. His work was finished. He just came up here to live it up a little." (MC 16)

In the preceding passage, we have examples of code-mixing and hybridization:

"Nakkoo" = the nosey one (from the Hindi *nak*=nose), "yara", an exclamation; and Tai explains how Isa used the deferential form *aap* of the personal pronoun, instead of the more casual *tu*, which is used to address social inferiors. The linguistic distinction thus becomes a social one; but only a Hindi or Urdu

speaker would be able to understand Tai's reference. "Please to sit" also sounds like Indian English.

Aadam subsequently marries Naseem, the daughter of a local landowner who had hired him as a doctor for her. It is not entirely clear in what language Aadam and Naseem speak to each other; Aadam is resolutely Westernized, a strong nationalist, while Naseem remains attached to traditional ways, and resents Aadam's wish that she give up purdah. She develops a highly idiosyncratic language, punctuated by the exclamation "whatsitsname":

Aadam Aziz frowned. "What is this, wife?" To which my grandmother answered, "This, *whatsitsname*, is a very heavy pot; and if just once I catch you in here, *whatsitsname*, I'll push your head into it, add some dahi, and make, *whatsitsname*, a korma." I don't know how my grandmother came to adopt the term *whatsitsname* as her leitmotif, but as the years passed it invaded her sentences more and more often. I like to think of it as an unconscious cry for help... as a seriously-meant question. Reverend Mother was giving us a hint that, for all her presence and bulk, she was adrift in the universe. She didn't know, you see, what it was called. (MC 41)

Throughout the novel, characters constantly use Hindi-Urdu words; in some cases they are translated for the non-Indian reader, in other cases they are not. Harish Trivedi claims that most of the Hindi words have an English translation, for "instant intelligibility":

[...] Rushdie does not risk incomprehension and spells out the meaning of whatever little Hindi he uses. Thus, "the Muslim *muhallas*" of Chandni Chowk are not left at that by him but specified to be "the Muslim *muhallas* or neighborhoods" [...] and in the phrase "Godown, gudam, warehouse, call it what you like", we have an embarrassment of riches, what with Indian English followed by Hindi followed by proper English.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Trivedi, "Salman the Funtoosh", 79.

Trivedi's point is that Rushdie's bilingualism is superficial, and that Hindi words are scattered here and there as a badge of authenticity which is not backed by a deeper mediation between the two cultures, Western and Indian. Trivedi here relies on a traditional concept of the relationship between the two languages and cultures involved in translation. This traditional perspective assumes a source language, or culture "invariably carrying an aura of authenticity—and a target one, seen in some way as imitative." Orsini finds it more productive to think of the relationship in terms of "guest" and "host" languages:

[t]he question then becomes not whether "individualism", for example, means something different in modern Indian [...] culture, but how Chinese or Indian writers might translate and deploy the concept to make locally significant points. In this way, what is untraditional is not necessarily seen as Western, or as un-Indian or un-Chinese.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, apart from the irrelevance whether Rushdie's bilingualism is superficial or not—presumably, the last thing he is interested in is "authenticity"—there is quite a large number of words left untranslated in the text. Just one example: "a real rutputty joint, with painted boards proclaiming LOVELY LASSI and FUNTABULOUS FALOODA and BHEL-PURI BOMBAY FASHION with filmi play-back music blaring out of a cheap radio by the cash-till [...]" (MC 215)

By contrast, Trivedi's review of the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* is highly complimentary. The reason why the translation has been so successful, according to Trivedi, is due to the quality of Seth's writing, which follows a

---

<sup>39</sup> Orsini, "India in the Mirror of World Fiction", 82.

method of culturally enriched reinscription. Trivedi says that of all the recent Indian English novels, *A Suitable Boy* is the most deeply embedded in the theme and the context which it depicts, and the most intimately complicit in a local language. Trivedi finds a confirmation of this in Seth's preface to the Hindi edition of *A Suitable Boy*:

Seth begins by saying that he is happier than he can say at the publication of this Hindi translation, for the translator has restored most of the episodes in his novel which were set in the Hindi-speaking area to "their original character", reconstructed the dialogue in a language which was the one which had resonated in his own ears, and thus made his work "stronger" in many respects.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting that Seth here talks of the "original character" of the Hindi dialogues, confirming the idea that in many places in the novel he is thinking of his writing as a translation from various *bhashas* into English.

### 5.6. National languages in *A Suitable Boy*

The language distribution among the characters of Seth's novel aims to foreground the four languages which are elevated to the role of languages of the nation, vehicles of national culture: English, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali. They are languages of the nation in the sense that the idea of nation consists of a process of idealization and selection of historical events, religious traditions, and *languages*, to construct an organic ideology which can claim a national representativeness. Not surprisingly, the characters who speak these languages all belong to the rising Indian middle-class—their languages are made into

cohesive and symbolic elements of national culture, while subaltern languages are relegated to the status of dialects. For example, the dialect spoken by the peasants in the fictional village of Debaria, another setting of the novel, is not considered a representative national language, and therefore is left unspecified. It appears in one of the very few dialogues left untranslated by the author:

Whenever he needed the bus push-started he would turn and yell in the powerfully vocalic *local dialect*:

“Aré, du-char jané utari auu. Dhakka lagauu!”

“And when the bus was about to move, he would summon them with a battlecry of:

“Aai jao bhaiyya, aai jao. Chalo ho!” (ASB 700)<sup>41</sup>

Debaria village-speak—elsewhere described as “rustic Hindi”—is not represented as a *national* language, but as a *local* dialect, without anchoring it to the specifics of its probable linguistic model, Bhojpuri.

The social group that dominates the language(s) of the novel is the Indian bilingual middle class, represented by four families. Each of the four families speaks one language more frequently, and a second one more occasionally, depending on the social context and the interlocutor, according to the following division:

	<u>frequent</u>	<u>less frequent</u>
• Mehras:	1) English	2) Hindi

<sup>40</sup> Trivedi, “Translation as Recovery”, 31.  
<sup>41</sup> Italics have been added. A rough translation would be: “Come on, two or four people get down and push... Come on board, brother, come on board. Let’s go!”

- |
- Kapoors:            1) Hindi        |        2) English

|

  - Chatterjis:        1) English     |        2) Bengali

|

  - Khans:            1) Urdu        |        2) English

Mrs Rupa Mehra, for example, speaks in English with her children, but Hindi with Mrs Mahesh Kapoor. Seth uses different registers of English to represent the different languages and genres in his text. According to Kachru, register variation is a characteristic of Indian English, and “the notion of register and its interplay in culture is perhaps especially relevant in understanding creative writing in English.”<sup>42</sup> Often the change is not explicitly signaled in the text, but is deduced from the type of character who is speaking, the caste and the social class to which he or she belongs, as in *Midnight’s Children*. An Indian reader, unlike a Western reader, would probably recognize from contextual clues that a language shift has occurred. The two authors’ representation of the Indian linguistic context is largely ethnodeviant.

The comic effects of Indian English are abundant in Seth as well as in Rushdie. It is interesting to note the difference between code-mixing, a use of linguistic variation that enriches the language with cross-cultural referents and terms, and the ridiculous but highly comic dissonance created by a visibly artificial use of English in Indian versification. Seth makes great fun of the worst

---

<sup>42</sup> Kachru, *The Indianization of English*, 44-45.

type of Indian English poetry, eminently exemplified by Dr. Makhijani's "Hymn to Mother India":

1. Who a child has not seen drinking milk  
At bright breasts of Mother, rags she wears or silks?  
Love of mild Mother like rain-racked gift of cloud.  
In poet's words, Mother to thee I bow.  
[....]
5. How to describe bondage of Mother pure  
By pervert punies chained through shackles of law?  
British cut-throat, Indian smiling and slave:  
Such shame will not dispense till a sweating grave. (ASB 163-164)

Passages of Indian English such as these appear as a parodic re-processing of linguistic registers in use, an objectification of different languages firmly orchestrated by the overarching authorial voice. These different styles and registers do not create a pastiche-like effect, as in Salman Rushdie's prose, where there is much less apparent control and hierarchy among the variants. Yet these instances of Indian English are not treated by Seth as deviant, or substandard, English. They are more "Pigeon-Indian"—as Mulk Raj Anand defines the imaginative transformation of Indian English—than "Pidgin-English," though the two often intermix, in Anand's opinion.<sup>43</sup>

A key feature of Indian English texts like *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* is their renditions of the different Indian milieus and their specific socio-linguistics. In *A Suitable Boy*, the various languages are pulled off with varying degrees of success: the scenes in Calcutta where the Chatterji dialogues

---

<sup>43</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, "Pigeon-Indian: Some Notes on Indian English Writing," *Response: Recent Revelations of Indian Fiction in English*, ed. Hari Mohan Prasad (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1983), 312. For Anand, "Pigeon-Indian" results from "our spontaneous biorythms and echoes of



take place are much more vividly memorable than the simple referential English which renders the speeches of the Debaria villagers. The Calcutta scenes feature the Chatterji family, whose idiosyncratic take on English is woven together with the novel's continuous interplay with poetry. Amit Chatterji is a poet; he and his siblings continuously exchange rhyming joking couplets:

"Rhyming, rhyming so precisely—  
Couplets, they are coming nicely,"

gurgled Kakoli, who churned them out with such appalling frequency that they were now called Kakoli-couplets, though Amit had started the trend. (ASB 526)

The contrast between the language-play which characterizes the Calcutta scenes and the much simpler language of the scenes set in the village of Debaria marks a distinct language divide between country and city in India. There is also a difference in the linguistic functions which are emphasized in each section.<sup>44</sup> Each function accentuates one factor of the linguistic process, of the act of verbal communication. The three functions relevant in this context are the referential function, the poetic function, and the metalinguistic function. In chapter seven, the Calcutta chapter, the metalinguistic function and the poetic function are predominant: emphasis is laid both on the code and on the message itself. Play on words implies continuous reference to the code which is being used, and draws attention to the communicative act *per se*.

---

the mother-tongue in the new synthetic language which is growing in the form of Indian-English writing." See Anand, "Pigeon-Indian", 308.

<sup>44</sup> Roman Jakobson ascribed six major functions to language, namely the referential function, the emotional function, the conative function, the metalinguistic function, and the poetic function. See Roman Jakobson, "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", *Style in Language* (New York: MIT Press and Wiley and Sons, 1960), 350-377.

Chapter 8 is set in Debaria, which the place of “exile” of the character Maan Kapoor, who has been temporarily banished from his father’s house because of his involvement with the Muslim courtesan Saeeda Bai. Maan is staying with his friend Rasheed and his family, who are small landowners, and traditional Muslims who keep purdah. In describing the life in the village, the narrator allows the referential function of language to predominate: emphasis on the context of the verbal message. In narrative terms, this means the predominance of the referential function over a descriptive-objective mode:

What did people do in the village, anyway? Maan asked himself. They waited; they sat and talked and cooked and ate and drank and slept. They woke up and and went into the fields with their brass pots of water. Perhaps, thought Maan, everyone is essentially a Mr Biscuit. Sometimes they looked upwards at the rainless sky. The sun rose higher, reached its height, sank and set. After dark, when life used to begin for him in Brahmpur, there was nothing to do. Someone visited; someone left. Things grew. People sat around and argued about this and that and waited for the monsoon. (ASB 722)

The narrator’s attitude in this section is filtered through Maan’s consciousness, a city boy who is initially disoriented by the strange lifeways of the village. Hence the language of the Debaria section is often ostensive, and marked by Maan’s sense of estrangement, as if conscious of pointing out an alien world. There is a defamiliarizing process at work in contrast to the Calcutta and Brahmpur settings. The narrator’s point of view is more at one with certain characters, than with others. Underlying this relation of identification/distancing between the narrative voice and the characters is the concept of “character zones” in relationship to the dialogic structure of the two novels.

### 5.7. Character zones and free indirect discourse in *A Suitable Boy*

Character zones describe the way a character extends his or her “sphere of influence” beyond direct discourse. Let us see an example of a character zone in *A Suitable Boy* in order to better define our zone of enquiry. In Seth, we have the scene of a fight over the English university syllabus between Pran Kapoor, a young lecturer in English literature, and the head of the department, the dreaded and suave Professor Mishra. Pran wants to include Joyce in the syllabus, whereas Mishra is against it. Why Eliot, and not Joyce, Pran argues, since Joyce could be said to have a better claim as a British writer in Modern British Literature than Eliot:

“That, my young friend, if I may say so,” cut in Professor Mishra, “could be considered a species of quibbling.” He was recovering quickly from his shock. In a minute he would be quoting Prufrock.

What is it about Eliot, thought Pran irrelevantly, his mind wandering from the subject at hand, that makes him such a sacred cow for us Indian intellectuals? (ASB 61)

Here the narrator identifies with Pran, and simultaneously distances himself from Professor Mishra: “He [Professor Mishra] was recovering quickly from his shock. In a minute he would be quoting Prufrock.” The voice of Professor Mishra is subsumed into the character zone of Pran, who attributes thoughts to the character of Mishra through the filter of his own indirect discourse.

Mrs Rupa Mehra, one of the central figures of the novel, has a correspondingly dominant sphere of influence: the overwhelming importance of family in the novel owes much to the fact that a good many scenes are seen through her particular window on the world. The following passage exemplifies

the double-voiced nature of a thought which is apparently stated by the narrator, and not directly attributed to Mrs Rupa Mehra, but which clearly belongs to her ideological sphere of influence. Mrs Rupa is composing a card to her not-much-liked stepmother, out of snippets of old cards which she keeps in a big black bag:

Now came the heartbreaking part: not the mere transcription of a stanza but the actual sacrifice of an old card. Which of the roses would have to be transplanted? After some thought, Mrs Rupa Mehra decided that she could not bear to part with any of them [....] The sheep, perhaps—yes, they would do. They were fluffy and unemotional. She did not mind parting with them. Mrs Rupa Mehra was a vegetarian, whereas both her father and Parvati were meat-eaters.. the three sheared sheep were driven carefully towards newer pastures. (ASB 44)

If judged by the formal markers above, the logic motivating the sentence seems to belong to the author, i.e. he is formally at one with it; but in actual fact, the motivation lies within the subjective belief system of Mrs Rupa Mehra. The diffuse use of character zones in the novel is what creates reader empathy for characters, and multiplies the number of “languages” in the novel.

### 5.8. Character zones and dialogue in *Midnight's Children*

In *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, zones are rendered through the dialogue of the characters, rather than through the fusion of authorial discourse and the speech of others, thus leading to a radically irreducible heteroglossia. We have only one point of view, that of the narrator Saleem Sinai. A consequence of Saleem's solipsism is that the characters are not as well rounded as in *A Suitable Boy*, for example, and to some extent we lack empathy for

them.<sup>45</sup> Since free indirect discourse is not an option for such a first-person narrator, characterization relies almost exclusively on dialogue, which is made to be as expressive of each character's individuality as possible. Thus we get a wide variety of strongly idiosyncratic idiolects, each using their own particular brand of Indian English.

In the Muslim muhalla in Delhi, when Saleem Sinai's birth is announced, the inhabitants speak Hindustani, rendered as a literal translation of Indian vernacular idiom. They are berating the Hindu Lifafa Das, who is showing his famous "peepshow", a sort of magical lantern full of pictures from all over India, while crying "Dunya dekho! See the whole world!" But communal hatred is sparked off, and from the balconies the Muslim inhabitants cry:

"Mother raper! Violator of our daughters!"[...] "Rapist! Arre' my God they found the badmaash! There he is!"[...] "So, mister: is it you? Mister Hindu, who defiles our daughters? Mister idolater who sleeps with his sister?" (MC 76-77)

These epithets—"Mother raper, mister idolater who sleeps with his sister", are typically Indian curses, namely specifically vernacular speech functions translated into English. Here the English is adapted to take on communal connotations: Lifafa Das is an "idolater", a worshipper of idols, which for Muslims is a grave blasphemy. Later on, we have Hindus cursing Muslims (more specifically, a Hindu criminal gang is cursing a group of Muslim businessmen, including Ahmed Sinai, for not bringing them their "cut"):

---

<sup>45</sup> Rushdie also realized this: "In *Midnight's Children*, most of the characters are in some way broken. They are not fully rounded. It's to do partly with the fact that they are seen from one point of view. So you see them in the limited way that one human being sees another." Interview, *Kunapipi*, 20.

"'Mother-sleepers! Eunuchs from somewhere!' [...] 'Sodomizers of asses! Sons of pigs! Eaters of their own excrement!'" (MC 85) Curses, blessings, flattery, and modes of address are typically Indian English registers that result from transfer of context, namely the shaping of the language to accommodate Indian social contexts. Here is an example of flattery: "Maharaj! Open, for one tick only! Ohé, from the milk of your kindness, great sir, do us favour!" (MC 91) These are "fare-dodgers" on the train, asking to be let in the compartments so as to escape the ticket-collector. "From the milk of your kindness" is a specifically Indian form of flattery.

The narrative of Saleem's life is now and then interrupted by scenes from the present in which he is writing. The "present tense" of the novel is characterized by his curious relationship with Padma, the illiterate pickle-worker who is his one-woman audience. Padma's conversation is in Hindi-Urdu:

"It was my own foolish pride and vanity, Saleem baba, from which cause I did run from you, although the job here is good, and you so much needing a looker-after! But in a short only I was dying to return.

"So then I thought, how to go back to this man who will not love me and only does some foolish writery? (Forgive, Saleem baba, but I must tell it truly. And love, to us women, is the greatest thing of all.)

"So I have been to a holy man, who taught me what I must do. Then with my few pice I have taken a bus into the country to dig for herbs, with which your manhood could be awakened from its sleep... imagine, mister, I have spoken magic with these words: 'Herb thou hast been uprooted by Bulls!' Then I have ground herbs in water and milk and said, 'Thou potent and lusty herb! Plant which Varuna had dug up for him by Gandharva! Give my Mr Saleem thy power. Give heat like that of Fire of Indra. Like the male antelope, O herb, thou hast all the force that Is, thou hast powers of Indra, and the lusty force of beasts.'" (MC 193)

In his analysis of the above passage, Prasad finds that the Indianisms of the text are instrumental in placing the character ethnically, geographically, and socially, but that generally Indians would not stick to English so consistently:

Most Indians, regardless of bilingual competence, would switch codes as well as mix them, speaking even whole sentences in a different language. It is impossible for someone with such a competence in English as low as Padma's to speak purely in English, however deviant that might be.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, he concludes, Padma must be speaking in Hindi, with some code-mixing from Sanskrit, and Rushdie's rendition of her speech is in actuality a carefully constructed and extremely literal translation of a non-existent original.<sup>47</sup>

When Baby Saleem is born, he acquires an ayah, Mary Pereira, who is a Christian, and presumably, speaks English. Mary feels guilty towards the Sinai family because at birth she exchanged their baby with someone else's, so that Saleem is not actually the son of Amina and Ahmed, but of a poor Hindu, who earns his living as a singer. The two most vivid dialogic voices of the novel are probably Amina and Mary, and they are also the characters who come most alive for the reader, with the possible exception of Padma. Between the two of them, they create a comfortable code-mixed "mothertongue" for Saleem,

---

<sup>46</sup> Prasad, "Writing Translation", 53.

<sup>47</sup> Indianisms include:

- "from which cause I did run from you". Here the syntax is modeled on Hindi, where the relative pronoun goes before the word it refers to (unlike English where it comes after, as in "the cause for which I ran away from you").
- "and you so much needing a looker-after!" Again we have the use of present continuous in lieu of the simple present, and "looker-after", a compound that sounds slightly comical to a native English speaker.
- the use of the present perfect – "I have been to a holy man", "I have spoken magic", instead of the simple past "I went", "I spoke". This reflects, again, a Hindi construction for the past tense.

characterized by its closeness to spoken Indian English. Unlike in *Kanthapura*, where Rao effectively creates an English based on Kannada speech-rhythms which has no basis in spoken language, in *Midnight's Children*, the dialogues often recall spoken Indian English:

"For God knows how long," Alice confided, "he tells me all about bulbuls; all fairy stories of its singing and what-all; how this Calipha was captivated by its song, how the singing could make longer the beauty of the night; God knows what the poor man was babbling, quoting Persian and Arabic, I couldn't make top or bottom of it. But then he took off the cover, and in the cage is nothing but a talking budgie, some crook in Chor Bazaar must have painted the feathers! Now how could I tell the poor man, him so excited with his bird and all, sitting there calling out, 'Sing, little bulbul, sing!' ... and it's so funny, just before it died from the paint it just repeated his line back at him, straight out like that—not squawky like a bird, you know, but in his own self-same voice: *Sing, little bulbul, sing!*" (MC 203)

Here Alice Pereira, Mary's sister, is telling the family about Ahmed's eccentricities, which are often brought on by drink. Ahmed has much less verbal presence in the novel than Amina does, and his characterization is often effected through ridiculous or shameful episodes such as this one, aimed at showing up his unpleasant character, and alienating the reader's sympathies from him. Whereas we tend to empathize much more with Amina, even when—(or especially when?) she commits mental adultery with her former husband, Nadir Khan. The opposite effect Amina and Ahmed have on the reader signal Saleem's hostility towards his father, and his strong love for his mother.

Saleem's childhood in Bombay, his dealings with family and friends, are all mediated through the Indian English of upper-class families living in

- 
- Instances of code-mixing with Sanskrit. Sanskritization usually denotes religious and/or philosophical registers; Padma here is talking of spells and magic, taken from Sanskrit texts.



Bombay in the 1950s. Bombay was the most Westernized of all big Indian cities, and the Sinais belong to the Anglicized business class that was emerging just after Independence. In this sense, then, the central part of the novel is not so different from the setting of *A Suitable Boy*, which also features the dialogues of middle-class Anglicized Indians like the Mehra and the Chatterjis, though these are Hindus. Saleem is brought up speaking both English and Urdu, but most of the dialogues of his Bombay period are in English. The language of this “Bombay period” of the novel is a language re-created from memory, gleaned and re-shaped from what Saleem remembers of his childhood, as he sits by his lamp “in a pool of Anglepoised light” and tells his story. Thus, though it sounds very much like spoken Indian English, it is still a creative re-imagining, rather than a faithful mimesis, of the “original”.

Even within the restricted upper-middle class world of the Methwold Estate, different varieties of Indian English co-exist, reflecting the larger heteroglossia of the entire novel. The English of Mary Pereira, which presents more code-mixing with Hindi, and usually deals with down-to-earth matters like food and care, is juxtaposed to the homosocial heartiness of his uncle Hanif, whose English is also code-mixed, but with different emphasis:

... He wallops me in the back, toppling me forwards into Mary's arms. “Hey little wrestler! You look fine!” “But so thin, Jesus! They haven't been feeding you properly? You want cornflour pudding? Banana mashed with milk? Did they give you chips?” [...] And Hanif booms, “Yes, tickety-boo! The boy is really ship-shape! Come on phaelwan: a ride in my Packard, okay?” And talking at the same time is Mary Pereira, “Chocolate cake,” she is promising, “laddoos, pista-ki-lauz, meat samosas, kulfi. So thin you got, baba, the wind will blow you away.” [...] “Your Pia aunty is waiting! My god, you see if we don't have a number one good time!” (MC 239)

From the above comparison between Seth's and Rushdie's use of them, it emerges is that in Rushdie, character zones are rendered through the dialogue of the characters, rather than through the fusion of authorial discourse and the speech of others, thus leading to a radically irreducible heteroglossia. Saleem recreates the language of the streets in the Indian English that is spoken in the magicians' ghetto. This is little more than a slum in the heart of old Delhi, where performing artists of all kinds eke out a difficult living. They speak the slangy Hindi of the streets, a bazaar language, which is rendered into a lively, ungrammatical, and varied version of Indian English: "'Resham Bibi,' said Parvati crossly. 'You got ants on your brain?' And Picture Singh, 'We got a guest, capteena—what'll he do with your shouting? Arré, be quiet, Resham, this captain is known to our Parvati personal! Don't be coming crying in front of him!'" (MC 386-387)

The formal deviations from British English in the language of the magicians are much more significant than in the language of other characters examined so far. Saleem's expressionistic translation, which includes grammatical mistakes, helps to emphasize their "vernacularity", marking their distance from the more Anglicized speech patterns of the middle-class Sinais.

Language is an essential part of the nation-building process that both novels portray. *A Suitable Boy* gives great space to different technical and professional jargons which form part of the linguistic fabric necessary for the development of a functional and democratic state. Bakhtin, on a theoretical level, similarly remarks that national heteroglossia, on which prose fiction draws, is composed of an enormous diversity of languages, including professional jargons. The professional jargons represented in *A Suitable Boy* go

from the description of proceedings of the Brahmipur High Court for the abolition of feudal property, to the highly technical accounts that Seth devotes to the various aspects of the shoe trade, and those he devotes to the intricacies of Indian business relations. English, Hindi and Urdu thus emerge as the languages of the nation-building process in post-Independence India—the languages of business, law, and politics.

English is the language of the High Court, where the fate of the Zamindari Abolition Act, a law that has been designed to abolish feudal property, is being discussed. The lawyer Bannerji, who is trying to demonstrate that the Act is unconstitutional, frequently quotes from the Indian Constitution, thus creating a pattern of intertextuality between the English of this document and his own legal language. By contrast, similar debates over the Zamindari Abolition Act that take place in the Brahmipur Legislative Assembly, are all in Hindi, or Urdu. This is not explicitly signaled in the text, but is conveyed through the use of a more elevated and poetic register of English, as exemplified by the rhetorical style of the politician Abida Khan, who identifies the Act as a crime against an entire culture and religion, that of the Muslim Nawabs, whose patronage sustained musicians, singers, and many other feudal dependents. Abida Khan accuses the government of not having the people's best interests at heart:

You have come between us and destroyed what was hallowed by the bonds of ancient emotion. And the crimes and oppressions you blame on us, what proof do these poor people have that you will be any better than you claim we are? [...] You have separated the nail from the flesh, and you are happy with the result.... (ASB 307)

Hindi-Urdu is the language of politics in the novel. This reflects the gradual rise of the Hindi-speaking regional elites after Independence as a result of democratic politics. This elite is represented in the novel by the Kapoors, and Seth shows that the gradual ascendancy of this class had already begun in the Fifties. The sharp differences in socio-cultural terms between this regional elite and the English-educated elite such as the Mehras and the Chatterjis are marked by the language divide. The fact that so much of the novel *de facto* belongs to a Hindi-Urdu linguistic sphere—though in “translation”—points to the contested hegemony of English as a link language in independent India.<sup>48</sup> Seth traces the roots of these fluctuations in linguistic popularity in the politics and society of the early Fifties, which can be defined as a foundational moment for Indian nation-forming.

*A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* show two different aspects of the hot debates raging around language in the young nation-state under Nehru. In *A Suitable Boy*, the Legislative Assembly is the battleground of identity, and of definitions of Indian citizenship, of which language is a fundamental part. A debate in the Legislative Assembly pits Begum Abida Khan, the representative of the Muslims, against the conservative Hindu Home Minister Agarwal. At stake is the official state language of Purva Pradesh:

L.N. Agarwal had sponsored a bill that would make Hindi the state language from the beginning of the new year, and the Muslim legislators were rising one by one to appeal to him and to the Chief Minister and to the House to protect the status of Urdu. (ASB 1104)

---

<sup>48</sup> Sunder Rajan, “Fixing English”, 16.

Begum Abida Khan takes the stance that the “two brother languages” should be adopted together, whereas Agarwal takes the hard line that there can only be one official language, or rather one official script, Devanagari: “Urdu is not being dispossessed, as the honourable member supposes. Anyone who learns the Devanagari script will find no difficulty in coping” (ASB 1107). Begum Abida Khan points out that the differences in the two language go beyond the different scripts that they adopt. But for Agarwal, adopting two scripts is equivalent to what in contemporary Hindutva politics is known as “minority appeasement”: “You are asking for a two-language theory now, you will be asking for a two-nation theory tomorrow”, he says to Abida Khan (ASB 1105). The conservative “one-nation, one-language” position runs counter to the point the novel is making in favor of a multi-lingual nation (albeit narrated, or “translated” in English for an international audience). This novel’s multi-lingual/crypto-English position reflects the linguistic situation of post-Independence India: though the Constitution listed 18 official languages of the Union, English *de facto* became the language of nation-building.

In *Midnight’s Children*, the heteroglossia of the nation-state is not foregrounded in the democratic space of a parliamentary debate, but rather in a violent riot. In 1956-57 there were language riots in Bombay, due to the conflict between the supporters of Marathi and those advocating Gujarati. These had coalesced into two political parties, each wishing for a linguistically delimited state, and each claiming Bombay for their own. The demonstrations of the two parties pass in front of the Methwold estate, avidly observed by Saleem and his friends: “to us children, the endless ant-trail of language in Warden Road

seemed as magically fascinating as a light-bulb to a moth" (MC 189). Saleem, at this time, is hopelessly in love with an American girl, Evie Burns, who has become the leader of their small group, and whom Saleem seeks to impress by riding on his sister's bicycle. But Evie isn't interested:

"Willya get outa my way, fer Pete's sake? I wanna see *that!*" Finger, chewed-off nail and all, jabs down in the direction of the language march; I am dismissed in favor of the parade of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti!

She later pushes Saleem down among the Marathi language marchers.

Smiles filled with good teeth surround me. They are not friendly smiles. "Look, look, a little laad-sahib comes down to join us from the big rich hill!" In Marathi, which I hardly understand, it's my worst subject at school, and the smiles asking, "You want to join S.M.S, little princeling?" And I, just about knowing what's being said, but dazed into telling the truth, shake my head No. And the smiles, "Oho! The young nawab does not like our tongue! What does he like?" And another smile, "Maybe Gujarati! You speak Gujarati, my lord?" But my Gujarati was as bad as my Marathi; I only knew one thing in the marshy tongue of Kathiawar; and the smiles, urging, and the fingers, prodding, "Speak, little master, speak some Gujarati!" [...] a rhyme designed to make fun of the speech rhythms of the language:

Soo ché? Saru ché!  
Danda lé ké maru ché!

*How are you? - I am well! - I'll take a stick and thrash you to hell!* (MC 191)

The heteroglossia of the Indian nation-state can threaten to break up territorial unity, as in the case of the language riots of Bombay. But more importantly, this episode highlights the most significant linguistic divide in modern India: that between English-speakers, almost invariably upper-class, and those who don't know English. As Kachru points out, code-mixing with English is not only pan-

Indian, but it is a marker of modernization, socio-economic position, and membership in an elite group. "It continues to be used in those contexts where one would like to demonstrate authority, power, and identity with the establishment."<sup>49</sup> Saleem, as a member of the Anglicized middle class, does not even know Marathi, the language of the state where he lives; and for him, language marches are a mere spectator's sport. The upper class, secure in its command of English, is little concerned with the struggle of one vernacular against another for supremacy: since English, is effectively, the language of command. Saleem finds himself suddenly thrust in the midst of these alien struggles; and narrowly escapes with his life.

The sites and protagonists of the language issue in the two novels differ starkly: in *A Suitable Boy*, the debate does not leave the democratic confines of the Legislative Assembly, and is articulated by two members of the upper classes, the zamindari class in the case of Abida Khan and the bania (or traders') class in the case of Agarwal. In *Midnight's Children*, the riot becomes the site for the forging of national identity—heteroglossia is collisional, the young upper-class English-speaking boy haplessly running into the crowd of underclass protesters. The scenes pointedly illustrate the different aspects of the nation-forming process highlighted by Seth and Rushdie respectively: democratic dialogue, on the one hand, and violent insurgency on the other. In this respect, one can say that the different historical contexts in which the texts are to be placed explain for their different attitudes to democratic processes: in the case of Seth, democratic debate, the importance of giving space to different representative voices of the Indian polity is sustained as an important value at a

---

<sup>49</sup> Kachru, *The Indianization of English*, 200.

time when the very meaning of being Indian is being hijacked by the Hindu right-wing. Rushdie, on the other hand, is writing a history of the nation from the perspective of a political situation which has seen the rejection of democracy on the part of the government: in this case, it is useless to invoke the merits of parliamentary debate, but rather the oppositional energies represented by the subaltern classes, such as the language marchers or the conjurers of the magicians' ghetto.

### 5.9. The politics of language mixture

In these pages I have tried to show that the staging of linguistic heteroglossia in the two novels serves an ideological function, expressing the idea of a pluralistic, secular nation-state. However, a similarity of Nehruvian political perspectives in Seth and Rushdie yields two very different Nehruvian "epics" of India. The irreducible heteroglossia of *Midnight's Children* emerges from the juxtaposition—or in some instances, pastiche—between the more or less literal "translations" from bhasha languages, indigenized varieties of English, and the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the book's master translator, Saleem Sinai. Saleem continuously stresses the unreliability of his translations, based as they are on an original stored in his memory. Yet ultimately, Saleem's abilities as a translator effect what all good translations aim at: a creative re-writing of the original. Thus the Indian English, fragmented as it is into innumerable Indian Englishes—as many as the languages spoken in India—is the linguistic counterpart of Saleem's endorsement of a pluralistic idea of the nation whose



multiple voices cannot be channeled into an overarching state discourse like that of the Emergency.

In Seth's case, the translator's role is played by the third-person omniscient narrator. Thus cultural and linguistic translation privileges a transparent, rather than opaque, or "dirty" medium. The symbolic nature of the translations from Indian languages in Seth reflects the symbolic-mimetic construction of his representation of India. His orchestration of the linguistic voices in the novels creates a well-defined hierarchy among them, an "ordered heteroglossia". This ordered heteroglossia reflects Seth's statist vision of the nation, the recuperation of a strong idea of India in the face of increasing political and social fragmentation.

In the language of both novels, translation plays an important role in the simultaneous vernacularization of English and globalization of the *bhashas*. Only through language mixture can the English be vernacularized and thus shaped into an Indian English, and yet only through translation can Indian languages become integral part of a post-colonial, globalized literary English: as Rushdie says, "it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained."<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 17.

## Conclusions: Beyond Dialogism?

For Bakhtin, the novel serves to represent people's speech and their ideological worlds. One comes to know one's own language only as it is perceived in the speech of others. What occurs within the novel form is "an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness—an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory."<sup>1</sup> In this vision of novelistic language, as the novel form becomes more and more sophisticated, fewer and fewer "rock bottom truths" remain without being drawn into dialogue. Is it ever possible then to move beyond the dialogism of the novel form in order to establish an "irreducible" ethical stance of the narrator? Young points out the simultaneous advantages and disadvantages of dialogism to "certain forms of minority politics". On the one hand, in fact,

it opens up the possibility of an opening to the other which does not construct it as an absolute other or transform it into the same. In addition, heteroglossia offers a means of breaking up the dominant monological discourses of oppressive systems, be they patriarchal, colonial, or neo-colonial, and allowing other voices to speak.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, however, for Bakhtin the dialogic form of the novel can only dismantle falsity, and never reveal truth:

Truth is restored by reducing the lie to an absurdity, but truth itself does not seek words; she is afraid to entangle herself in the word, to soil herself in verbal pathos.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 365.

<sup>2</sup> Young, *Torn Halves*, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 309. Quoted in Young, *Torn Halves*, 49.

It would appear that dialogism is an endlessly refracting discursive mechanism, which apparently disables dialectics (which is premised on the idea that essential change or development in the world occurs through the conflict of opposed processes) in its constant implication of the self in the other. It dissolves all boundaries so that conceptual distinctions as such become impossible to sustain.<sup>4</sup> It is not immediately obvious whether, given its “internally riven economy”, dialogism could offer a basis for a pragmatic reconciliation between secular and religious worldviews in the public sphere, rather than a mere uncritical acquiescence to cultural difference. (However, Bakhtin explicitly rejects the idea that dialogism is a form of cultural relativism).<sup>5</sup>

In my thesis I have attempted to show how Seth and Rushdie have strategically employed the dialogism of the novel form as a privileged space for the representation of different worldviews. Novelistic language appears to be in clear contrast to the more monologic language of the social sciences (as they are constituted at present, though I have also mentioned the recent historiographical trends that seek to “dialogize” history, such as the Subaltern Studies collective). *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* are two recent literary attempts to envision the secularization of the public sphere in India. Both novels directly address the problems arising from the conflict between previous religious and communitarian identities and the national secular identity that constitutionally defined Indian citizenship after 1947. Rushdie and Seth exemplify two representative positions in narratives of India in English. On the

---

<sup>4</sup> Young, *Torn Halves*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 69. See also discussion on dialogism in Chapter One.

one hand, *A Suitable Boy* endorses a secular rationalist position, which relegates religion to the “private” narrative of the novel, and translates *bhasha* terms in a national meta-language, namely English. On the other hand, *Midnight’s Children* narrates the multiple births and origins of the Indian nation-state, making it problematic to wholeheartedly endorse the Nehruvian secular myth of India as a nation which is in the process of “developing” towards modernity and industrialization. In *The Satanic Verses* it is even more clear that Rushdie does not adopt a rationalist secularism “against” religion in this novels (though he is very much a rational secularist in his recent essays on Islam).<sup>6</sup>

However, I would like to suggest that on an “ethical-pragmatic” level, the “language” of *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight’s Children* is irreducible to dialogism. The two can and should be linked together as narratives that move from a broadly similar perspective, that of a “practical” secularism. Despite Rushdie’s and Seth’s different approaches to the relationship between nation and state, and to rationalism as a guiding principle in the conceptualization of the public sphere,<sup>7</sup> they both display a similar rejection of its takeover by violent and sectarian political forces. The Raja of Marh in *A Suitable Boy* is arguably one of the most unsympathetic characters in the novel, given his obstinate determination to build a temple in honor of the god Ram at a very short distance away from the mosque in Brahmpur. His crowning ambition is to install a massive Shiva-linga, which has lain for centuries at the bottom of the Ganga,

---

<sup>6</sup> See Rushdie, “The Attacks on America” (391-393) and “Not About Islam?” (394-397), *Step Across This Line*. He pronounces a rather superficial indictment of an “unenlightened Islam” which contrasts disappointingly with his complex critique of rationalist secularism in his early novels: “The fundamentalist seeks to bring down more than buildings. Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women’s rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex.” See “The Attacks on America”, 393.

inside the temple, despite the protests of Muslims, who consider it a “profane monolith”, and of the local devotees, who believe it should continue to lie in the bed of the river. When the Raja of Marh obtains permission to drag it up from the waters, with the help of two hundred men, he stands by watching triumphantly as the exhausted workers try to pull it up the bank. At one point, however, the linga breaks free of the ropes that are pulling it, and rolls back into the Ganga, crushing all those who are in its path.

Down the rollers rolled the great linga, past the next step, and the next, and the next, gathering speed as it rolled. The tree trunks cracked under the impact of its weight, it veered to left and right, but it kept rolling on, down, down, swifter and swifter towards the Ganga, crushing the pujari who now stood in its downward path with his arms upraised, smashing into the burning pyres of the cremation ghat, and sinking into the water of the Ganga at last, down its submerged stone steps, and onto its muddy bed.

The Shiva-linga rested on the bed of the Ganga once more, the turbid waters passing over it, its bloodstains slowly washed away. (ASB 1442)

This final image of the linga rolling bloodily down to its true resting-place, the invisible river-bed, where it can be worshipped by Hindu devotees while remaining out of the public sight, symbolizes Seth’s view of the perilous consequences of religious incursions in the public sphere. Rushdie’s anti-communalist message in *Midnight’s Children* is equally powerful, though he does not quite share Seth’s belief that the separation of religion and state can be made to work effectively in India. Both authors can be said to espouse a form of “practical” secularism—perhaps the irreducible kernel of their fiction which cannot be further dissolved into a dialogic relation with its opposite, sectarianism. This form of “practical” secularism would broadly include both

---

<sup>7</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 106.

Rushdie's radical secularism and Seth's rationalist secularism. In a related gesture, Ghosh's espousal of syncretism as an alternative way of envisaging nationalism in the subcontinent, can be included in this position. A ready justification for occupying a "practical" secular position is premised on Gayatri Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism", which is a necessary consequence of putting theory into practice:

Even as we talk about *feminist* practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalizing—not only generalizing but universalizing. Since the moment of essentializing, universalizing, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it in the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it.<sup>8</sup>

When the practice regulates or "norms" the theory (as Spivak says), one gives away one's theoretical purity, because "you pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side".<sup>9</sup> It is the kind of strategy, says Spivak, that without destroying these ideas, secularism, nationalism, internationalism, culturalism, shows that "they have historical faultlines": they are vulnerable, as opposed to bad, ideas.<sup>10</sup> Both novels articulate the complex interweaving of religious and secular identity in India today, while suggesting different solutions for its negotiation, making use of the dialogic framework of the novel as a genre eminently suited for the staging of epistemological clashes. Nonetheless, beyond the dialogism inherent to the genre in which they have chosen to write in, both authors reveal their ethical positions quite clearly. In

---

<sup>8</sup> Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic*, 12.

doing so, they assume responsibility for their stories (of course Rushdie has been obliged to do so, on an extremely personal level, after the declaration of the *fatwa*). Their responsibility as postcolonial writers appears necessary at a time in which Hindutva and Islamism are becoming increasingly hegemonic versions of Hinduism and Islam in the globalized public sphere.<sup>11</sup>

However, the problem of talking across a discursive divide in South Asia remains open. Where is the space in which to begin to address such a conflict? Might dialogism have a hermeneutical function in such an arena? Sunder Rajan suggests that perhaps the only possible way out of this problem is to focus on the question of gender. In doing so she sketches out the site for an effective negotiation between secularist and “religious” positions. In a recent article in *Social Text*, she lays out the complex theoretical and legal problems ensuing from both statist and communitarian interventions in the secularism issue, as it pertains to gender rights and the debate around a Uniform Civil Code in India.<sup>12</sup> The establishment of a Uniform Civil Code is opposed by minority communities because they perceive it as a threatening imposition on the part of the majority community.<sup>13</sup> It is a fact, however, that personal laws of all communities are

---

<sup>10</sup> Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> One way to understand religious fundamentalism is to see it as the internalization of a neo-Orientalist form of self-representation. Mufti points out the passage in Said’s *Orientalism* where Said explicitly names his addressees, which include not only the West, but also the inhabitants of postcolonial space: “My hope is to illustrate the formidable structure of cultural domination and, specifically for formerly colonized peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon others.” Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 24-25. Mufti comments that “a major impulse behind the critique of Orientalism is therefore the possibility, the danger, that Orientalist descriptions take hold and repeat themselves in the very societies that they take as their objects.” Said’s emphasis “draws our attention to the terrifying doubling of neo-Orientalist discourse within the nation-space itself, the national struggle for sovereignty and self-determination now increasingly framed in religious terms as a struggle over the fate of places and meanings that predate the nation.” See Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”, 110-111.

<sup>12</sup> Sunder Rajan, “Women Between Community and State”.

<sup>13</sup> This is the reason why the Indian Constitution does not have a Uniform Civil Code, because Nehru believed at the time that minority identity should be protected by preserving its personal

discriminatory towards women.<sup>14</sup> The debate at the present time is whether to allow “a muted and qualified” support of state intervention in the matter of women’s rights, that are seen to be inadequately protected by communities, an “inner realm” that is generally masculinized. Or conversely, to push for internal reform of the communities, so as to protect religious and cultural identities from a majoritarian state. In the debate over secularism, what very clearly emerges is that neither theoretical position—statist or communitarian—vis-à-vis the secularism question, is unassailable. Both the secularism debates and the feminism debates on the Uniform Civil Code, in Sunder Rajan’s view, “point to the need for, even as they are reflexive about, the space for deliberations, consultation, argument, discussion, and consensus, which alone can produce meaningful social transformations”.<sup>15</sup> This space, which is located outside the state and its institutions, is civil society. It is only within this space, which in India is contended by both religion and secularizing reform, that the secularism issue will be decided: “through the clashes that take place on these terms and in this sphere, rather than by a peremptory intervention by the state or by initiatives within communities.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense dialogism may yet have an important role to play in structuring exchanges and debates on secularism within civil society. The novel as a form points to a possible exchange between worldviews by allowing its readers to choose between the various discursive positions represented by the different characters and to empathize—perhaps even identify, at some level—with these varied religious/secular/skeptical

---

laws and not subjecting it to the rule of the majority. The Constitution however strongly endorsed the progressive implementation of a Uniform Civil Code for all its citizens, once secularization would take hold in all parts of Indian society.

<sup>14</sup> Sunder Rajan, “Women Between Community and State”, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Sunder Rajan, “Women Between Community and State”, 67-68.



perspectives. It remains to be explored if, and how, this dialogic negotiation is articulated in other postcolonial literatures that emerge out of different configurations of secular and religious tendencies in the public sphere.

---

<sup>16</sup> Sunder Rajan, "Women Between Community and State", 68.

## Bibliography

### Works by Salman Rushdie

*Grimus*. 1975; repr. London: Vintage, 1996.

*Midnight's Children*. 1981; repr. London: Picador, 1982.

*Shame*. 1983; repr. London: Vintage, 1995.

*The Jaguar Smile*. 1987; repr. London: Vintage, 2000.

*The Satanic Verses*. 1988; repr. Henry Holt, 1997.

*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. 1990; repr. London: Granta, 1991.

*Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta, 1990.

*The Wizard of Oz*. London: British Film Institute, 1992.

*East, West*. 1994; repr. London: Vintage, 1995.

*The Moor's Last Sigh*. London: Vintage, 1995.

*The Screenplay of Midnight's Children*. Adapted from his novel and intr. Salman Rushdie. London: Vintage, 1999.

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. 1999; repr. London: Vintage, 2000.

*Fury*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2001.

*Step Across this Line: Collected Non-fiction 1992-2003*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2003.

### Works by Vikram Seth

*Mappings*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1980.

*From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1983.

*The Humble Administrator's Garden*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1985.

*The Golden Gate*. London: Faber, 1986.

*All You Who Sleep Tonight*. London: Faber, 1990.

*Beastly Tales From Here and There*. 1991; repr. London: Phoenix House, 1994.

*Three Chinese Poets: Translations of Poems by Wang Wei, Li Bai and Du Fu.* London: Faber, 1992.

*A Suitable Boy.* 1993; repr. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.

*Arion and the Dolphin: A Libretto.* London: Phoenix House, 1994.

*Poems 1981-1994.* New Delhi: Viking, 1995.

*Koi Accha-sa Ladaka [A Suitable Boy].* Trans. Gopal Gandhi. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1998.

*An Equal Music.* London: Phoenix House, 1999.

### **South Asian literature**

Chandra, Vikram, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain.* London: Faber, 1995.

Chatterjee, Upamanyu, *English, August: An Indian Story.* London: Faber, 1988.

Chaudhuri, Amit, ed., *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature.* London: Picador, 2001.

Desai, Anita, *In Custody.* 1984; repr. London: Vintage, 1999.

Desani, G.V., *All About H. Hatterr.* 1948. Rev. ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

Ghosh, Amitav, *The Circle of Reason.* London: Granta, 1986.

Ghosh, Amitav, *The Shadow Lines.* 1988; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Ghosh, Amitav, *In An Antique Land.* London: Granta, 1992.

Ghosh, Amitav, *The Calcutta Chromosome.* 1996; repr. London: Picador, 1997.

Ghosh, Amitav, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma.* New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998.

Ghosh, Amitav, *The Glass Palace.* 2000; repr. London: Harper Collins, 2001.

Hosain, Attia. *Sunlight on a Broken Column.* 1961; repr. New Delhi: Penguin, 1994.

Jussawalla, Adil, ed., *New Writing in India.* New Delhi: Penguin, 1974.

Kesavan, Mukul, *Looking Through Glass.* New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1995.

- Kolatkarr, Arun, *Jejuri*. Bombay: Pras, 1978.
- Mistry, Rohinton, *A Fine Balance*. 1995; repr. London: Faber, 1996.
- Narayan, R.K., *Swami and Friends*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1935.
- Narayan, R.K., *The English Teacher*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1945.
- Narayan, R.K., *The Painter of Signs*. London: Heinemann, 1977.
- Narayan, R.K., *Under the Banyan Tree*. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Rao, Raja, *Kanthapura*. 1938; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. 1997; repr. London: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Rushdie, Salman and Elizabeth West, eds. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*. London: Vintage, 1997.
- Satthianadhan, Krupabai, *Kamala, the Story of a Hindu Life*. 1894; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993.

## Secondary Sources

### Books

- Ahmad, Aijaz, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992.
- Ali, Tariq, *An Indian Dynasty: The Story of the Nehru-Gandhi Family*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1985.
- Amin, Shahid, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Atkins, Angela, *Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953.

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Austin Press, 1981.

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Paladin, 1973.

Bassnett, Susan and Harish Trivedi, eds., *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Basu, Kaushik, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.

Bersani, Leo, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*. London: Marion Boyars, 1978.

Bhabha, Homi, ed., *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Bhargava, Rajeev, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Bhattacharjea, Aditya and Lola Chatterjee, eds., *The Fiction of St Stephen's*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2000.

Bose, Sugata, and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Brennan, Timothy, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. London: Macmillan, 1989.

Brennan, Timothy, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Brown, Judith M., *Nehru*. Harlow: Longman, 1999.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chatterjee, Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books, 1986.

Chatterjee, Partha, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Chatterjee, Partha, *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Cohen, Keith, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

*Constitution of India*. Sixth Edition. Allahabad: Law Publishers, 2000.

Cronin, Richard, *Imagining India*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1989.

Das, Veena, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

De Man, Paul, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Second edition, revised. 1971, 1983; repr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London: Athlone Press, 1984.

Dingwaney, Anuradha and Carol Maier, eds., *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Furet, François, *Interpreting the French Revolution*. Trans. Elborg Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Furst, Lilian R., ed., *Realism*. London: Longman, 1992.

Gandhi, Leela, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand, *An Autobiography: or the Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Trans. Mahadev Desai. Intr. Sunil Khilnani. 1927; repr. London: Penguin, 2001.

Gopal, Sarvepalli, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*. Vol. 2. London: Jonathan Cape, 1979.

Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.

Guha, Ranajit, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Habermas, Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: Polity, 1992.

Hasan, Mushirul, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence*. London: Hurst, 1997.

Huggan, Graham, *Marketing the Margins: The Postcolonial Exotic*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Hutcheon, Linda, *Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Inden, Ronald, *Imagining India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Jaffrelot, Christophe, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilisation (With Special Reference to Central India)*. London: Hurst and Company, 1996.

James, Henry, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*. Introduction Richard P. Blackmur. London: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1934.

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

Joshi, Priya, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture and the English Novel in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Joshi, Svati, ed., *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*. 1991; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Kachru, Braj, *The Indianization of English: The English Language in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Khilnani, Sunil, *The Idea of India*. London: Penguin, 1997.

King, Bruce, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.

King, Preston, *Toleration*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1976.

King, Robert D., *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Kopf, David, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

Lamb, Alastair, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy 1846-1990*. Hertingfordbury: Roxford Books, 1991.

Madan, T.N., *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, ed., *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003.

Mitra, Subrata K., *Culture and Rationality: The Politics of Social Change in Post-colonial India*. London: Sage Publications, 1999.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*. 1985; repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, ed., *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Nandy, Ashis, Exiled at Home : comprising At the Edge of Psychology, The Intimate Enemy, Creating a Nationality. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Neale, Walter C., *Economic Change in Rural India: Land Tenure and Reform in Uttar Pradesh, 1880-1955*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.

Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery of India*. 1946; repr. London: Meridian Books, 1956.

Nehru, Jawaharlal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Nehru, Jawaharlal, *Letters to Chief Ministers 1947-1964*, ed. G. Parthasarathi. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Government Fund, 1986.

*New Yorker: Special [Indian] Fiction Issue* (June 23-30, 1997).

Pandey, Gyanendra, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Paranjape, Makarand, ed., *Nativism: Essays in Criticism*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997.

Paranjape, Makarand, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000.



Parkinson Zamora, Lois and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

Rajagopal, Arvind, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Read, Anthony and David Fisher, *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence*. London: Pimlico, 1998.

Ricoeur, Paul, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed., trans. and introd. John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Sacks, Sheldon, ed., *On Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Said, Edward, *Orientalism*. 1978; repr. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Said, Edward, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*. London: Faber, 1983.

*Seminar*: [Special Issue on] *New Writing in English* 384 (August 1991).

Sethi, Rumina, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

Singh, Jyotsna, *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues: Discoveries of India in the Language of Colonialism*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Smith, Donald Eugene, *India as a Secular State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Tolkien, J.R.R., *Tree and Leaf*. 1964; repr. London: Unwin, 1988.

Van der Veer, Peter, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Viswanathan, Gauri, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Wolpert, Stanley, *A New History of India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Young, Robert J.C., *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Young, Robert J.C., *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

### Articles

Ahmad, Aijaz, "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically", rev. of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Frontline* (Aug. 8, 1997), 103-111.

Albertazzi, Silvia, "Dal romanzo borghese alla soap opera: *A Suitable Boy* di Vikram Seth", *Ai confini dell'impero. Le letterature emergenti*, ed. Paola Galli Mastrodonato. Rome: Vecchiarelli Editore, 1996. 11-21.

Anand, Mulk Raj, "Pigeon-Indian: Some Notes on Indian English Writing," *Response: Recent Revelations of Indian Fiction in English*, ed. Hari Mohan Prasad. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1983. 307-333.

Ashcroft, W.D., "Language Issues Facing Commonwealth Writers: A Reply to D'Costa", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 22: 1 (1987), 99-118.

Baneth-Nouailhetas, Emilienne, "Forms of Creation in *A Suitable Boy*", *Commonwealth* 22:2 (Spring 2000), 69-83.

Barthes, Roland, "The Reality Effect", *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov. Trans. R. Carter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. 11-17.

Baxi, Upendra, "The Constitutional Discourse on Secularism", *Reconstructing the Republic*, ed. Upendra Baxi, Alice Jacob and Tarlok Singh. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1999. 211-233.

Bhargava, Rajeev, "History, Nation and Community: Reflections on Nationalist Historiography of India and Pakistan", *Economic and Political Weekly* 35:4 (Jan. 22-28, 2000), 193-200.

Brasted, H.V. and Carl Bridge, "The Transfer of Power in South Asia: An Historiographical Review", *South Asia* 18: 1 (1994), 93-114.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?", *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia. London: Arnold, 1996. 223-247.

Chandhoke, Neera, "A Nation Searching for a Narrative in Times of Globalization", *Economic and Political Weekly* 34:18 (May 1, 1999), 1040-1047.

Chandra, Vikram, "The Cult of Authenticity", *Boston Review* (February/March 2000). n. pag. Online. <<http://bostonreview.net/BR25.1/chandra.html>>. Sept. 1, 2003.

Chatterjee, Partha, "Religious Minorities and the Secular State: Reflections on an Indian Impasse", *Public Culture* 8:1 (Fall 1995), 11-39.

Das, Arvind, "Agrarian Change from Above and Below: Bihar 1947-78", *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993. 180-227.

Das, Veena, "Introduction: Communities, Riots, Survivors—The South Asian Experience", *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots, Survivors*, ed. Veena Das. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990. 1-36.

Dastur, Aloo J., "The Pattern of Maharashtra Politics", *State Politics in India*, ed. Iqbal Narain. Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1968. 183-191.

Desai, Anita, "An Interview with Anita Desai", *World Literature Written in English* 30:1 (1990), 47-55.

Desai, Anita, "Sitting Pretty", rev. of *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, *New York Review of Books* (May 27, 1993), 22-26.

Desai, Anita, "A Coat of Many Colors", *South Asian English: Structure, Use and Users*, ed. Robert J. Baumgardner. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. 221-230.

Deshpande, Satish, "Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-Century India", *Public Culture* 10:2 (Winter 1998), 249-283.

Devadawson, Christel R., "'Shaking up a Continent': Biography as a Postindependence Response", *ARIEL* 29:1 (Jan. 1998), 109-127.

Dhareshwar, Vivek, "Caste and the Secular Self", *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (Dec. 1993), 115-126.

Edwards, Simon, "The Geography of Violence: Historical Fiction and the National Question", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 34:2 (2001), 293-308.

Foucault, Michel, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977. 139-164.

Freitag, Sandria B., "Contesting in Public: Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Communalism", *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, ed. David Ludden. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996. 211-234.

Gandhi, Leela, "Concerning Violence: The Limits and Circulations of Gandhian *Ahimsa* or Passive Resistance", *Cultural Critique* (Winter 1996-97), 105-147.

Gavron, Jeremy, "A Suitable Joy", *Guardian Saturday Review* (Mar. 27, 1999), 6-7.

Ghosh, Amitav, <<http://www.amitavghosh.com>>. Online. Sept. 2002.

Guha, Ranajit, Preface, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. 35-36.

Guha, Ranajit, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. 37-43.

Guha, Ranajit, "The Migrant's Time", *Postcolonial Studies* 1:2 (1998), 155-160.

Hamilton, Ian, "The First Life of Salman Rushdie", *New Yorker* (Dec. 25, 1995-Jan. 1, 1996), 90-113.

Huggan, Graham, "Consuming India", *ARIEL* 29:1 (Jan. 1998), 245-258.

Iyer, Pico, "India Day by Day", rev. of *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, *Times Literary Supplement* (Mar. 19, 1993), 20.

Jakobson, Roman, "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. New York: MIT Press and Wiley and Sons Press. 350-377.

Jalal, Ayesha, "Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia", *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in South Asia*, ed. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997. 77-103.

Jameson, Fredric, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986), 65-88.

Jha, Ashok K., "Vikram Seth: *The Golden Gate* and Other Writings", *Recent Indian Fiction*, ed. R.S. Pathak. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994. 54-69.

Kapur, Geeta, "Contemporary Cultural Practice: Some Polemical Categories", *Social Scientist* 18:3 (1990), 49-59.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, "Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly* 21: 38-39 (Sept. 20-27, 1986), 1697-1708.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, "On the Discourse of Secularism", *Secularism and Indian Polity*, ed. Bidyut Chakrabarty. New Delhi: Segment Book Distributors, 1990. 185-207.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, "The Imaginary Institution of India", *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey. Vol. 7. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. 1-39.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, "Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India", *Nationalstaat und Sprachkonflikte in Süd- und Südostasien*, ed. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Dietmar Rothermund. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992. 25-65.

Khan, Muhammad Ishaq, "The Significance of the Dargah of Hazratbal in the Socio-Religious and Political Life of the Muslims", *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*, ed. Christian W. Troll. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. 172-188.

Krieger, David, "Conversion: On the Possibility of Global Thinking in the Age of Particularism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58: 2 (Summer 1990), 223-243.

Lazarus, Neil, "The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism", *The European Legacy* 7:6 (Dec. 2002), 771-782.

Lipscomb, David, "Caught in a Strange Middle Ground: Contesting History in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*", *Diaspora* 1:2 (1991), 163-189.

Mee, Jon, ""Itihasa"; thus it was': *Looking Through Glass* and the Rewriting of History", *ARIEL* 29:1 (Jan. 1998), 145-161.

Mee, Jon, "Not At Home in English? India's Foreign-Returned Fictions", *The Round Table* 362 (2001), 711-720.

Mink, Louis O., "Narrative Form as Cognitive Instrument", *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert Canary and Henry Kozicki. Madison: University of Madison Press, 1978. 129-149.

"Missing Relic Found After 9-Day Search", *Hindustan Times* (Jan. 5, 1964), 1.

Miyoshi, Masao, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State", *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993), 726-751.

Mufti, Aamir, "Reading the Rushdie Affair: 'Islam', Cultural Politics, and Form", *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism and the Public Sphere*, ed. Richard Burt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 307-339.

Mufti, Aamir, "Secularism and Minority: Elements of a Critique", *Social Text* 45 (1995), 75-96.

Mufti, Aamir, "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism and the Question of Minority Culture", *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998), 95-125.

Mukherjee, Arun, "The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: A Case Study", *ARIEL* 22:3 (July 1991), 27-48.

Myers, Juliette, "Postmodernism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*", *Manuscript* 1:2 (Spring 1996). n. pag. Online. Oct. 8, 2002. <<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/ENGLISH/MS/rushdie.htm> >

"Nation Shares Kashmir's Grief", *Statesman Overseas Weekly* (Jan. 4, 1964), 3.

Nehru, Jawaharlal, "Presidential Address", 1951-1954: *Towards Freedom From Want*. Vol. 14 of *The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, ed. A.M. and S.G. Zaidi. New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1981. 28-44.

Nehru, Jawaharlal, "Report to the All-India Congress Committee (July 6, 1951)", 1951-1954: *Towards Freedom From Want*. Vol. 14 of *The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress*, ed. A.M. and S.G. Zaidi. New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1981. 146-169.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life", *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. and afterword Richard T. Gray. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. 85-167.

O'Hanlon, Rosalind and David Washbrook, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34:1 (Jan. 1992), 141-167.

Orsini, Francesca, "India in the Mirror of World Fiction", *New Left Review* 13 (Jan.-Feb. 2002), 75-88.

Pandey, Gyanendra, "The Prose of Otherness", *Subaltern Studies: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*, ed. David Arnold and David Hardiman. Vol. 8. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994. 188-221.

Pandey, Gyanendra, "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today", *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. 1-33.

Pathak, Zakia and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Shahbano," *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 257-279.

Pierce, Peter, "Preying on the Past: Contexts of Some Recent Neo-Historical Fiction", *Australian Literary Studies* 15:4 (Oct. 1992), 304-312.

Prakash, Gyan, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32:2 (Apr. 1990), 383-408.

Prakash, Gyan, "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography", *Social Text* 10 (1992), 8-19.

"Prophet's Hair Missing from Shrine", *Hindustan Times* (Dec. 28, 1963), 1.

Rao, Vidya, "Ghazal: Form and Performance", *Seminar* 423 (Nov. 1994), 48-53.

Rushdie, Salman, Interview, *Kunapipi* 4:2 (1982), 17-26.

Rushdie, Salman, "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance", *Times* (July 3, 1982), 8.

Rushdie, Salman, Interview, *Helix* 19-20 (1984), 55-69.

Rushdie, Salman, "Choice Between Light and Dark", *Observer* (Jan. 22, 1989), 11.

Sangari, Kumkum, "The Politics of the Possible", *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1987), 157-186.

Sangari, Kumkum, "The Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies", *Economic and Political Weekly* 30:51 (Dec. 23, 1995), 3287-3390.

Savarkar, Vinayak D., "Some of the Basic Principles and Tenets of the Hindu Movement", *Between Tradition and Modernity: India's Search for Identity. A Twentieth-Century Anthology*, eds. Fred Dalmayr and G.N. Devy. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998. 114-120.

Seth, Vikram, "To Cut a Long Story Short", *Times Magazine* (Mar. 20, 1993), 20.

Seth, Vikram, "Eleanor Wachtel with Vikram Seth", *Malahat Review* 107 (Summer 1994), 85-102.

Seth, Vikram, "A Poet at Heart: Vikram Seth Talks to Sudeep Sen", *Wasafiri* 21 (Spring 1995), 22-25.

Seth, Vikram, "The Seth Variations", *Atlantic Online* (June 23, 1999). n. pag. Online. Sept. 2, 2003.  
<<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/ba990623.htm>>

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha. Vol. 4. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1985. 330-363.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Acting Bits/Identity Talk", *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992), 770-803.

Splendore, Paola, "A oriente dell'occidente: l'India", *Altri lati del mondo*, ed. Maria Antonietta Saracino. Rome: Sensibili alle Foglie, 1994. 145-161.

Srivastava, Aruna, "'The Empire Writes Back': Language and History in *Shame and Midnight's Children*", *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Postcolonialism and Postmodernism*, ed. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991. 65-78.

Srivastava, Neelam, "Inter-Textual Links in Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* and His Doctoral Thesis", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2 (2001), 45-64.

Srivastava, Neelam, "The Multi-Lingual Context of Indian Fiction in English", *Anglistica* 5:1-2 (2001), 105-123.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari, "Fixing English: Language, Nation, Subject", *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India*, ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992. 6-28.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari, "Women between Community and State: Some Implications of the Uniform Civil Code Debates in India", *Social Text* 65, 18:4 (Winter 2000), 55-82.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari, "Writing in English in India, Again", *Hindu* (Feb. 18, 2001). n. pag. Online. July 7, 2001.  
<<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/02/18/stories/1318067m.htm>>

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari, "Dealing With Anxieties", *Hindu* (Feb. 25, 2001). n. pag. Online. July 7, 2001.  
<<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/02/25/stories/1325067a.htm>>

Ten Kortenaar, Neil, "*Midnight's Children* and the Allegory of History", *ARIEL* 26: 2 (April 1995), 41-62.

Thapar, Romila, "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity", *Modern Asian Studies* 23:2 (1989), 209-231.

Tharu, Susie and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender", *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Vol. 9. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996. 232-260.

Trivedi, Harish, "India and Postcolonial Discourse", *Interrogating Postcolonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, ed. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996. 231-247.

Trivedi, Harish, "Translation as Recovery: *A Suitable Boy* as *Koi Achcha-sa Ladaka*", rev. of Gopal Gandhi, trans., *Koi Achcha-sa Ladaka* [*A Suitable Boy*] by Vikram Seth, *The Book Review* 22:9 (September 1998), 30-31.



Trivedi, Harish, "Rushdie into Hindi: *Midnight's Children* on Native Ground", rev. of Priyadarshan, trans., *Aadhi Raat Ki Santaanen* [*Midnight's Children*] by Salman Rushdie, *The Book Review* 22:12 (December 1998), 35-37.

Upadhyaya, Prakash Chandra, "The Politics of Indian Secularism", *Modern Asian Studies* 26:4 (October 1992), 815-853.

Viswanathan, Gauri, "Beyond Orientalism: Syncretism and the Politics of Knowledge", *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review* 5:1 (1996), n. pag. Online. Sept. 2, 2003.

<<http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/viswanathan.html>>

"Water Pipes Freeze in Srinagar", *Hindustan Times* (Dec. 28, 1963), 1.

Woodward, Richard, "Vikram Seth's Big Book", *New York Times* (May 2, 1993), late ed. *New York Times OnDisc*. Online. Nexis. Feb. 2000.

